



JADE ALYSE

When You
Come to Me

When You Come to Me



2012 © Jade Alyse

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to JadeAlyseWrites.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author

Foreword



I present this book with a little trepidation. I first wrote this as a result of a long, winding bend of confusion that had lasted almost two years between myself and a person of the opposite sex. Four years ago in the early spring of 2007, I was only twenty-years old and a junior in college, and my frustration turned into jotting down ideas and feelings in between classes. I was sitting in the parking deck on a particularly warm day in early March, and while I should have been studying my notes for my forthcoming art class, I was reeling from the conversation I'd had with the aforementioned person of the opposite sex. I realized that we'd never work in the way I'd figured in my head. It was equally tragic because we were best friends and we spent a great deal of time with one another. But the disparity of our color and cultural makeup were always glaring us in the face. So, as I sat in my car with my laptop in front of me, and the clock ticking, I began to think:

"So what if it did work? What would happen? Would it be easier? And why would it work?"

I'm a romantic, and I'm a sucker for happy endings. But I also enjoy realistic dynamics. Please don't read this as an autobiography. Although I am very similar to Natalie Chandler in many ways, my characters are a composite of people I hold very near and dear to my heart. They are my inspiration. Some of them are mentioned below.

Even years later, I still recall writing this novel as being one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life (thus far). It was like my first love in many ways: it was my first completed novel, and anything I've written since, I've unconsciously compared to it. And though my writing has since matured, I still like to read this from time to time and reflect on how inspired and happy I was. After all, I would feel shameful about not putting it out there, when the people mentioned below know it just as well (if not better) than I do.

These people helped in my creative process more than they realize. Some stayed up nights with me coming up with titles, names and new ideas, some said that they were similar to the characters. But they all read and listened to me go on

and on about it, partially out of love for me and out of genuine love for the book itself.

Without further adieu, this book is dedicated to **Dea Sloan**, who read my ratty mead notebooks in 10th grade band and thought that they were the best things in the world. To **Alonzo Dent**, who stayed up with me until sunrise coming up with titles for this book, who answered every single one of my asinine questions. To **Princess Valentine**, who hated when I gave her random chapters that weren't in order, who always wanted me to do this. To **Kashif Norville**, for patiently listening to every single one of my ideas, good or bad, long or short.

I love you all.

*When you come to me, unbidden,
Beckoning me
To long-ago rooms,
Where memories lie.
Offering me, as to a child, an attic,
Gatherings of days too few.
Baubles of stolen kisses. Trinkets of borrowed loves.
Trunks of secret words,
I CRY.*

WHEN YOU COME

Maya Angelou



Chapter One

NATALIE, THE
BEER BOTTLE, &
TRENT ROAD



SHE WAS THE FIRST IN HER FAMILY to go to college. For years and years, her older sister Sidney had been the shining light of the family, until her plans got deterred, having to painfully announce to the rest of the family that she had a baby girl due in December. And though Leah had been a blessing, it didn't really change the fact that her dear sister's future would never be the same. Sidney had been twenty at the time, claiming love for Leah's arrival – love for Darrell Nolan, her boyfriend of three whole years, whose future peaked the moment he took the job in the mailing room at a law firm. Pleasing Darrell, loving Darrell, wanting Darrell mattered more to her than her mind, her well-being, her future, her intelligence.

She hadn't been more than ten feet away from her family her entire life, and as each day passed, she became less and less sure about her decision to go to Athens, to go to the University of Georgia, a world starkly different from her own.

Her being was the honeysuckle bushes that surrounded the brick house with the white wraparound porch where she lived with her mother and two sisters. Her soul was the cool autumn breezes at the state fair in October. She was the taste of homegrown peaches on the porch at sunset, the fireflies that danced about the yard in twilight. Her spirit was as easy and as comfortable and as soft as the patter of rain against the window on Sundays, was as incalculable and as enigmatic as the stars and the moon. She belonged to an array of mag-

nificent complexions, a glorious spectrum of browns and honeys and ambers and mahoganies.

She was an element of a sweet southern life, wasn't she? For years, she'd enjoyed the perspective of being surrounded by people who looked like her, who talked the same, quiet, honey-dipped drawl, a life that her mama, with her hips and breasts and deep, booming voice, approved of. And though Athens was only a two-hour drive from Decatur, though there was still the distinct southern flair in the atmosphere, it wasn't home, it wasn't her life.

She was a brown, big-eared, willowy something that hot, sticky August in the year two-thousand. She was seventeen, and, consequently, she was the youngest girl, in smelly, yellow-tiled, cramped, ten-floored Allen dormitory. She stood awkwardly at five-foot-ten and each night, she prayed to God that she didn't grow another inch. It wasn't enough that all the girls who lived on her floor snickered as she walked past, her increasing height would only add to the hilarity. A day didn't go by when her head of natural waves, baby fine and soft, irritatingly unmanageable, didn't give her grief. She kept it up as best as she could, and it hung loosely past her defined, boney shoulders, layers tickling at her pronounced collarbone. She never had much trouble with her skin growing up. She owed it to good genes, to her grandmother and her mother's almond tone.

She was a victim of cruel isolation from the rest of the girls, and she spent most of her nights in the first couple of

weeks since the start of college, locked in her cramped dorm room, dreading the moment that her roommate would return.

Samantha was the only one that didn't give her grief, that only smiled at her awkwardness, her impish, icy disposition, as if she reminded her of a child, brave enough to walk away from its mother for the first time. Natalie Chandler took a surprising leap of faith when she asked her roommate, if she could accompany her to wherever she was going one Saturday night. Sammy was a hotheaded blond known for her loud alternative, black nails, and stiletto boots. She was a northern Georgian, who carried a heavy twang, like most of the other girls who lived in the dorm, who, at eighteen, had the most intense relationship of anyone on that third floor hall. Billy was steely-haired and rather greasy, and smelled more like stale cigarettes and warm beer than any bar in town. Nevertheless, on the nights that Sammy didn't spend the night with him, she was on the phone with him to the early hours of the morning, telling him how much she loved him and blah, blah, blah. Natalie nearly felt the urge to gag at their nonsense, at their young and rather pathetic depiction of love. Sammy was there on a merit scholarship, Billy worked third shift at a Walmart in Tucker, unloading inventory from trucks. What sort of evocative relationship could they have? They were night and day, an apple and an orange, the sun and the moon...

Sammy laced up her knee-high boots at the moment that the skinny brown nerd stood in front of her, gave her

quiet roommate a look of disbelief, perhaps recalling in her mind the many, many moments that she came back to the room and saw Natalie sitting at her worn brown desk with a book in her hands on Friday nights.

Sammy looked at her, grinned slowly and said, "Natalie Chandler, you actually want to leave the room?"

Natalie nodded timidly. Of course she did. She was feeling wild at the moment, wanted to get the whole "college experience" out of her head, wanted all the other girls on the hall to stop snickering as she walked past with a book in her hands, wanted to prove something. But she couldn't think of what. She anticipated that, by the end of the night, she would be patting herself on the back, would realize that all the partying and nonsense that went on was not all that it was cracked up to be.

"Alright then," her roommate replied, a tinge of warning in her tone, as if to suggest that she should inevitably brace herself. "Let's go."

Sammy was given her older brother's old red Tacoma as a birthday present that summer, and she climbed behind the driver's seat with pride of her hand-me-down, while Natalie and four of the other girls that lived in the dorm sat uncomfortably in the back, the wind from the fleeting vehicle blasting her in the face as they drove through downtown, entering a small development, forested and quiet.

There was a house of blue siding on a narrow, unevenly paved street called Trent Road, set on a decline, set beneath

a bevy of oak trees, dripping wet that night, after a long afternoon of Indian summer rainfall.

Natalie listened to one of the girls who claimed that she'd met the people who lived in the house. Four boys lived there, and they always threw parties, especially on warm nights. It was one of the housemate's twenty-first birthday: a real knockout, an athletic something that a lot of people knew, and a lot of people liked.

They entered the house, minimally decorated, with creaking and worn hardwood floor, wood paneling on the walls, ratty curtains, and the occasional poster of Bob Marley or a symbol of the cannabis leaf, or some vintage rock band that she didn't recognize. It smelled of stale beer, sweat and some type of strange perfume, and the house, with its small living room, barely-existent kitchen and nearby bedrooms, gave it a strangely cozy feel, with the exception of the one hundred or so people occupying the living area.

She stood by Samantha for awhile, and allowed herself to get settled into the scene unfolding around her, watching students come and go, watching alcohol being passed from the left to the right, watching this white girl grind on this white guy, and that white guy try to pick up that white girl. She found the whole situation strangely entertaining, like a scene from a bad teenage romantic comedy. She grew slightly uncomfortable when her roommate offered her a can of Budweiser. This gesture made Natalie's face grow hot, and she pushed her roommate's hand away. Mama would have died!

"No, thank you," she told Sammy politely, watching the girl's face wince with displeasure.

"Natalie, it's only a can of beer," Sammy replied, rolling her eyes. "You've never had beer before?"

No, she could honestly and proudly say that she hadn't, and witnessing all the drunken mayhem that surrounded her that moment, she was certainly glad that she hadn't.

"You certainly are the strangest little thing I've ever met," Sammy murmured.

Was she? Was she so strange that she didn't enjoy the debauchery in the same way that her roommate enjoyed it? She realized then that this wasn't her scene, realized that this wasn't the place for a Christian girl, and she increasingly got the urge to smack Sammy in the face for offering her alcohol.

As if Sammy knew any better...

She'd somehow lost Sammy among the people an hour later, and she wandered around aimlessly, in the darkness, bumping into couples that lurked and cuddled in shadowed corners together, while Bob Marley wailed his reggae blues through the speakers. She then wished that she could have been at home, cooking with her mama, arguing with her sisters, letting her grandma spoil her. Instead she was here, amongst an insane amount of white people, the most she'd seen in her entire life.

After all, wasn't it her decision to go to UGA? Could she necessarily complain?

Natalie Chandler shoved past people left and right, heard their loud banter, watched beer cans fly over her head, waited for the moment that she would wake up from this nightmare. She headed back in the direction of the kitchen, figured that Sammy had to be somewhere near there and...

BAM!

She felt something strike her forehead, and as she attempted to reach up with her boney hand, she fell backward, barely feeling someone reach out for her, stopping her before she fell onto the hardwood floor.

When she opened her eyes again, she tried to make out her surroundings, was highly unsuccessful, tried to take a breath, found it difficult, and her head throbbed with relentless power.

She determined that she was in a room, a very cloudy room, of course, but certainly some sort of room. She assumed it was a bedroom; saw the hazy silhouette of a collection of posters on one wall, and a set of tall gold trophies, standing on a shelf against another, and a series of pictures on a chest of drawers. The door was closed, but the noise on the other side was so apparent that it made her head hurt worse. A faint voice hailed above her head, distantly, like a specter. She was strong enough after a couple of moments had passed, to raise her arm and lay her boney hand flat against her forehead, feeling the tightened knot, pulsating between her fingers.

Her hearing got better as well, yet her vision still lacked, and she attempted to follow the sound of the voice with her eyes, the lids of which were heavily dimmed under the straining light hovering near the voice.

“Damn it, I’m—I’m sorry,” the voice stammered. “I didn’t see you coming...honest...I-I would’ve been more careful if I’d seen you...”

The voice was deep, richer than any one she’d heard before, even deeper than her father’s, though that was a voice she hadn’t heard in many years.

Natalie Chandler attempted to moan something indecipherable, and she rolled her head over in pain, regretting the moment that she ever set foot into the house.

“Damn it, I knew I was drinking too much—my—my girlfriend told me that this beer would be the one to do it for me...I hate it that she was right...I hate it that she’s always right.”

Natalie only moaned again. This time she could open her eyes a little, just enough to see the lofty figure, looming above her head.

His hair was black, almost to the point of where it appeared a deep-seated blue in the glaring light near his face, like the Superman in the comic books she’d read as a child.

His eyes were a salient, atypical blue.

They were certainly very hard to ignore, all big and round and alert like that. They dreamingly reminded her of a bay in the Caribbean, or a cloudless sky in midday.

He was a pretty boy, who garnered skin that wasn't too pale, who possessed a body that wasn't drastically muscular, but toned in all the right places. He was most certainly the kind of white bread, all-American, apple pie, Midwestern-mannered type of white boy. She assumed immediately that she'd seen so many of his kind before, becoming numb to the familiarity of his physical characteristics. Frankly, she was not impressed, as if that mattered at that moment, as if this pretty boy hadn't just knocked her in the head with a beer bottle, as if she didn't have a humongous knot on the side of her forehead.

She looked at this boy, examined his mature face, saw the redness of it that lacked any kind of sobriety, saw him sway slightly from side-to-side, as if it were a struggle to stand up straight.

"Are you okay?" this boy asked, over the thump of the bass-induced music, beating against the door of the room in which they were posted.

She sat up a little, he backed off from her slightly, and she continued to look at him.

He extended his hands in the direction of her face and she winced, knocking his hands out of the way.

Silence.

"I was—I was just trying to—"

"Don't worry about it," Natalie Chandler told the boy.

He'd laid her on the bed. The audacity! The nerve of this boy to have touched her! What the people outside must

have thought! She managed to slide past him, managed to slide off of the bed, adjust her shirt, and brush down her coarse hair with her hands.

"Are you sure you're okay?" the boy asks again.

"I'm fine...really...just fine."

But she wasn't. She was disheveled, wasn't she? She couldn't think straight, could barely stand up straight, and she couldn't really breathe.

She was barely on her feet no more than a few seconds before she stumbled dizzily, feeling the Pretty Boy catch her swiftly and envelop her small frame in his arms. She shuddered deeply beneath his startling strength.

She couldn't look at him and didn't want to.

"Yeah you're right, you're okay," the Pretty Boy teased.

He placed Natalie Chandler back on the bed.

He cautiously sat next to her. She didn't like the proximity.

"My girlfriend is probably wondering where I am," he told her in a low tone. "We had a fight earlier—over Christmas break. What a dumb fight, huh?"

She studied the boy's face. Apparently he didn't expect her to answer, because he continued following a heavy sigh.

"She wants me to go home with her, meet her entire family," he told her. "What does she expect from me? I'm only a junior, barely twenty-one...I'm not ready...should I be ready?"

Natalie was scared. She chose not to answer. She only stared at the Pretty Boy.

“Her name is Sophia,” he whispered, eyes distant as if to reflect on her name. “That’s pretty, isn’t it?”

This time, Natalie nodded.

“She’s pretty too...beautiful...blond hair, green eyes, slim figure, athletic, smart, fantastic smile...my sunshine.”

“Oh.”

“Three years,” the Pretty Boy stammered. “Three years I’ve been with her...loved her, dealt with her, made her cry, made her laugh...she wants to marry me...I don’t want to marry her...I don’t think I-I ever did...as much as I love her...I don’t want to marry her...I don’t want to marry my Sophia...”

The Pretty Boy sunk his head low, let out a low, grumbled belch, and ran his thick hand through his ravenous hair, and it fell back into his face, shielding those remarkable blue eyes.

And suddenly, without warning, the Pretty Boy jumped up from the bed, and his expression changed completely. There was a smile on his face as he stood in the middle of the room, looking at her. He startled her when he lunged out toward her, took her by the hand, and guided her off of the bed with him. He leaned in close to her face, his breath, hot, reeked of alcohol, and he mumbled, “Come with me...I don’t want her to see us.”

In a flash they were out of the house, the moisture of the night and the heat hit Natalie Chandler’s face coolly; he was still holding her hand.

She didn’t know his name! What was she thinking? Was she that stupid? Clearly, surely...

Hadn’t her mother warned her about this? Going off with strangers? Being alone with boys period? Clearly, surely...

And yet, there she was, allowing this white boy to pull her down the street, her head still throbbing wildly, the moon, full and luminous above their heads.

He was much taller than she originally thought; had to have been at least six-foot-three. And he certainly looked much older than twenty-one.

They ran down an incline towards another dead end road, an embankment blocked off by a fence of maples, dripping wet. He guided her through the trees; across a long expanse of mushy ground, until they ended up at a small body of water. He stopped. He was still holding her hand.

They were both out of breath, he stared blankly before him, the small ripples of the pond, smeared in the moon’s glow, rolling forward against the balmy breeze.

He dropped her hand and he collapsed against the ground, slightly slanted into the water, and he leaned back against his arms.

“I come here all the time,” the Pretty Boy began, still trying to catch his breath. “To think, to breathe, to get away from Sophia.”

Natalie didn’t answer. She still stood in the spot in which he left her, still stood her distance.

Silence once more.

He startled her when he reached for her hand again and pulled her down onto the ground, into the wetness.

This boy had lost his mind! Her butt was wet, she was cold, it was the middle of the night, and she had never felt further away from home than she did that night.

He didn’t look at her.

“Brandon Greene,” he said. “My name is Brandon Greene. Junior. My major is Business Administration. I’m from Saratoga Springs, New York. And it’s my birthday...”

“Happy Birthday...”

He looked at her. His eyes appeared amazing in the cool glow of the moon.

“You’re a freshman, right?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. “You have that look in your eyes. That innocence. You’re beautiful...fucking beautiful. And I’m trying not to look at you. I’m trying to stay faithful. I cheated on Sophia once. Freshman year, right after we started dating. I don’t even remember that girl’s name.”

“Natalie Chandler,” she whispered, turning her round brown face away from his.

“What?”

“My name is Natalie...”

She turned back to him.

“Oh, so you do speak.”

“Of course I speak.”

He sloppily extended his hand to her. “Nat—Natalie...nice to meet you...sorry about the beer bottle...welcome to UGA...”

Chapter 3

SWEET
SAVANNAH & THE
MIDNIGHT HOUR



HER MAMA called her that morning and it made her late for her first class. "How are your classes? Are you getting along with everyone? Grandma sent you some cookies...did you get them? Were they still fresh? Are you keeping your room clean? Hold on, Maya's here, she wants to talk to you a minute..."

Natalie figured that by choosing to go to school in Athens, she was just far enough away from home to get the sense of independence that she longed for. Moreover, the city possessed the security of remaining within a southern atmosphere. It wasn't that she was afraid to venture toward a new society altogether, as Sidney had decided to do when she moved to New York for a couple of years; she was, simply put, too afraid to venture that far away from her family. She ultimately believed that, if something happened to them, they would be too far out of reach.

Set beneath the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains, the college town featured a fully restored downtown, dotted with pretty baby magnolias and myrtles, and row beyond row of antebellum homes, hidden beneath graying Spanish moss.

The warm Georgian weather placed her outside, more often than she would be at home, sitting in a porch swing set beside her dormitory, swinging gently, reading a book.

She'd chosen Biochemistry at UGA because they'd given her the most money; a point she spent many days arguing with her mother about.

"There are plenty of good schools in Atlanta, Nattie," she'd said. "You can commute back and forth and you won't

have to worry about staying in one of those God-awful dorms...just consider it..."

She'd desperately attempted to finesse the conversation. She told her mother that although the potential of her being out of her element would be great, the university provided an excellent change of pace for her. She argued that the student population, predominantly white, predominantly conservative, predominantly southern Baptist, would provide her with an open-mind, would force her to step outside of herself. She rarely saw white people in Decatur. There was an understood separation between her world and theirs.

She was excited about the library job she'd found in early September, working as a page three times a week. Working in this venue allowed her to maintain the focus needed for her rigorous workload as a biochemistry major, and with its convenient location on campus (just a few paces down from her dormitory), it allowed her, one without a car, to get away from her loud roommate and her pompous boyfriend. It was a quiet place of refuge, giving her just enough money to feel comfortable buying groceries each week, and just enough to where she could buy that new shirt that she wanted at the mall or that missing piece to fix her computer.

She was given the duty of maintaining the business books on the eighth floor, a subject that disinterested her incredibly. She couldn't fathom anyone on earth being interested in reading about marketing ethics, research and development and financing basics, for pleasure. Yet, much to her own surprise,

within the short span of the three weeks she'd started working there, Natalie Chandler was slowly learning the database by heart, and when, by some unlucky chance, a student came up to her and asked about a book's location, she was able without hesitation to point them in the right direction.

She experienced her first midterm crisis in early October, just two days following her eighteenth birthday, with three exams in the span of three days, and by her Friday afternoon shift, one cold day, she discovered a quaint corner on the other end of the advertising shelf, curled her slender brown body into a ball, and fell asleep on the floor.

She was awakened suddenly, completely unaware of how long she'd slept. She aimlessly reached up and lunged out at the figure tapping her on the shoulder. She felt two hands grabbing at her arms as if to stop her flailing, amidst her hazy vision. She blinked her eyes twice, felt breath on her face, and caught eyes with the same blue-eyed Pretty Boy from the party. She sat up slowly, he removed his hands, and she heard him sigh, and with one swift movement, he helped them both get to their feet.

"Of all places," he said, clearing his throat, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his light-washed jeans. She'd forgotten how tall he was; a spectacle, surely, with his t-shaped body structure, immediately suggesting to her that he was an athlete at some point in his life.

"I'd tell you the same thing," she replied.

Natalie dusted herself off, cleared her throat, finger-combed her long, coarse hair, and moved past him. She

walked toward the small, tan cart of accounting books, and began shuffling through them.

"Brandon," he called after her.

She looked in his direction, found his preppie attire amusing, and said, "What?"

"Brandon Greene is my name," he began. "Just in case you forgot..."

She internally admitted that she hadn't, and had surprised herself at how many times she sat in lab and thought about her funny interaction with the drunken white boy celebrating his twenty-first birthday, how often she thought about those eyes of his. He consequently became the most interesting thing she'd seen at eighteen thus far.

He said his name in a way that brought forth the idea that he was placing himself, slowly, subtly sure, in her life, quietly establishing that this would not be the last time that she'd see him, as if such a random thought existed. She wished, examining his casual stance from top to bottom, that he didn't smile at her in such a friendly manner, and she wished that she had something clever to say, that would serve as a blockade to keep him from entering her life, learning more about her. Her only hope was that he'd simply grab a book and walk away.

"Natalie," she told him with a heavy sigh, returning her focus to the books.

"I didn't forget," he laughed.

Funny he said that, considering how long it'd been since they met, considering his level of intoxication that night. But then she thought about how long they sat by the pond that night, how they sat in silence, watching the moon, how, with some strange feeling accompanying her thought, she felt that he understood her, asked nothing more of her than just her company.

"You look hungry," he told her, approaching her slowly.

"Can't," she said, clearing her throat. "I have to work..."

"And what time do you get off?"

"Six o'clock," she said with a sigh.

She watched him check his watch and say, "Hm, that's funny...because it's six-thirty...so...do you always sleep through your shift?"

...

They approached a green Ford Explorer, parked on the side of the library and he let her in first, shutting the door behind her. The sun was setting to the right of the sky, turning its hue into a milky coral. He entered behind the tan wheel thereafter, fumbling with his keys.

"So, where are we eating?" she asked.

He looked in her direction and grinned. "Don't know, really...most times I just like to get in my car and see where my subconscious takes me..."

She figured he would say something like that. She didn't have the brainpower to respond in a witty way.

He took off in the direction of downtown. She couldn't really afford going out to dinner. She'd made a pact to herself to not spend money on trivial things. But she felt that this Brandon Greene was a different breed. His appearance gave way to his fortunate financial upbringing. He wore a crisp buttoned-down sky blue shirt, rolled at the sleeves, bringing out the color of his eyes. And the smell of his proximity caught her attention...the freshly scented cologne.

His appearance, in addition to the music that came out of his stereo, was most certainly a lot different than the white boys she saw around her parts. He exuded a special air of sophistication, old-world handsomeness; his black hair parted and styled and gelled just right, his beige skin a rather warm complexion.

...

"Jack and Martha Greene," Brandon told her over cheeseburgers downtown. They watched the sun set over the magnolias that lined the street; the breeze was light, the sky a fiery red, the sound of the traffic, whirring by slowly, minute chatter surrounding them. "That sounds very pretentious doesn't it?"

Natalie nodded. "Sounds very white," she said coyly, licking ketchup off of her brown fingers.

He laughed. "Yea, that too."

Brandon Greene's strong northern accent, reverberating off the depth of tone in his voice, didn't seem to be affected by southern culture and its heavy drawl. It was more articulate, sharper, more refined.

The level of comfort she felt around him was alarmingly instant, and she arched her eyebrow at the feeling that this oatmeal-skinned northerner was an old friend, someone whose smile she'd always loved, because it always eased her.

"Helen...Helen Chandler."

He looked at her, as though he were waiting for her to continue. "So...there's no father?"

Natalie shook her head. "Nope. Hasn't been since I was a child. Mama kicked his alcoholic behind out and that's the last that I saw of him."

She realized then that that was the first time she'd spoken of her father since it happened...to anyone.

He didn't say anything, only nodded.

"Brothers or sisters?" she asked him, catching the light of the fading sun along his cheek.

He wiped the remains of spilled mustard from the noticeable cleft in his chin and said, "Three brothers...I'm the youngest...Mark, John and Matthew...I'm the only one that wasn't named after a gospel."

She giggled.

"Spiritual?"

"Hardly...Catholic by birth...parents kind of strict, turned me off of it as I got older. Still believe in God, though."

"What about you?" he asked.

"God-fearing girl..."

"I can tell that...that's not what I meant," he told her.

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"Um, two sisters. Maya, the youngest and the coolest and the prettiest, and Sidney...who's older than me, who's more of the homemaker type, lives in Columbia...can cook up a storm. I chose to stay closer to home."

"And that's because...?"

"I love my mama..."

"A good reason," he said. "So, I'm guessing that you're her favorite?"

"Arguably so..."

"Oh, of course. Middle name?"

"Savannah."

"Natalie Savannah...let me guess...it's your grandmother's name?"

"Nope. It's where my mother was born. And it's Spanish...my...my father was Dominican."

"Ah! So close," he said with the defeated snap of his fingers.

"And your middle name?"

"David...no real significance...except for the fact that..."

"That it came from the Old Testament..." Natalie finished for him, smiling.

"Precisely! Couldn't escape it."

They ended up walking down a quiet sidewalk after dinner in silence. She was surprised that he was so willing to pay for each of their meals. His instant generosity was duly noted.

With the sun completely hidden, and the moonlight prevalent, Natalie Chandler and Brandon Greene, reveled in their newly formed alignment, while she became a walking paranoia, expecting all eyes to be on her and this Caucasian boy, questioning why they interacted then. The chilly breeze brought her closer to him, and Brandon, broad-shouldered and vertically intimidating, became a good source of warmth.

He looked down at her as she rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

“I’m sensing that you’re cold...”

Natalie nodded, laughed a little. “Is it that obvious?”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you to put clothes on when you leave the house?”

Yes, she felt shameful. The day had been warm and she’d stepped out of her dorm room that afternoon before work, with nothing more on than a small, fitted t-shirt and a pair of jeans.

Brandon Greene clicked his teeth, rolled his big blue eyes, and removed his black nylon jacket from his shoulders.

“Here,” he offered to her.

“I’m fine,” she told him.

“You’re shaking,” he observed. “Take the jacket...”

She huffed, took it from his hands and wrapped the garment around her slender body that smelled strongly of him, and laughed inside at its size and the way it loosely hung off of her dainty shoulders.

“Great, now I can freeze...”

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling the jacket closer to her body, grinning.

“So...you can be funny too?”

“When I want to be,” she admitted, sucking in her bottom lip slightly.

“I didn’t take you for a funny girl...”

“Like I said, I can be when I want to be...and you don’t know me...I could be the funniest person you’ve ever seen...”

“I find that hard to believe...funny people can’t be quiet people...and you are definitely a quiet person...”

“You don’t know me...” She repeated it this time, hoping that he allowed it to sink in.

“Hell, that doesn’t matter,” he told her. “It’s in your eyes...”

...

He offered her ice cream at Sarah’s on Birch Tree, and following several refusals, she gave into those blue eyes, hidden beneath a flap of black hair caught in a whirring breeze. And they sat on a bench beneath a streetlight, the air, cooling, Brandon’s warmth nearby, the smell of food, filling her nostrils.

Brandon’s cellular phone vibrated then, and after saying, “Excuse me,” politely, he flipped the device open, cleared his throat and answered, “Hello? I’m downtown...on Birch Tree...yes...yes...I’m with a friend...why does it matter who I’m with? No, you don’t know who this friend is...no, it’s not a girl...yes...yes, Sophia, my God, yes... [Brandon shrunk into a

little ball then, his broad shoulders rolled forward, indicating that he was most certainly getting an earful]...Sophia, I...yes, Sophia...I will pick you up in a little while...I don't care...I don't care if you stay the night...don't you have class in the morning? Holy shit, Sophia, I swear...okay...okay...we can talk about it in a little while...yes, I promise...I'll call you when I'm on my way...yes...Goddamnit, Sophia...yes...I—I love you too...goodbye...”

When he replaced the phone in his pocket, he looked at Natalie.

“Sophia?” she asked.

He nodded, sighed heavily, and reached for his keys. “Jeez, you catch on so quickly...”

“Last time I checked, I didn't have a penis...”

“I didn't think pretty, innocent freshman girls were allowed to say that word...”

She pursed her lips and balled her hand into a fist, threatening to hit him. He flinched slightly and only laughed at her.

“Sorry about that,” he told her. “If I even mentioned the name Natalie, she would have flipped...I'll tell you now, I don't have very many girl friends because of her...”

“Well,” Natalie sighed, playing with the remains of her melted vanilla cake cone. “This was fun while it lasted, right?”

Natalie got to her feet, tossed the rest of her cone in the trash can nearby, and dusted off her bottom.

“Do you mind giving me a ride? Or will Sophia have a heart attack? If she calls again, I can do a mean man's voice...”

He laughed. “Hopefully, that won't be necessary...I can definitely take you home...”

The green Explorer pulled up to Allen dormitory and he killed the engine.

Looking at her, Brandon said, “Would you like me to walk you up?”

She smiled, and whispered, “So chivalry isn't dead...”

“I'm halfway decent, I suppose...I can park and we can walk...”

“Why don't we just call it a night here?”

He sighed. His eyes indicated that he still wanted to push the issue; instead, he flopped back into his leather seat, gripped the steering wheel and nodded.

“You independent girls make me sick,” he chuckled. “You make the guys that actually want to do something for you look bad...”

She opened the door to his car, and stepped out slowly, retrieving her bag in the process. She gave him an expression of a solid thank you and a solid goodbye, figuring in her mind that this would be the last time she'd see this person.

“Goodnight, Brandon,” she'd said quietly, smiling softly at him.

“Natalie,” he'd returned, obviously reading her expression, knowing.

...

The December frostbitten air kept her inside more often, and she found it a struggle to go to class each morning. The cold weather simply made her uncomfortable. She was relieved when final exams had passed, anticipating the moment when she could return home to Decatur, to her family, to comfort, to safety, to a honey cured ham, sweet potato pie, and collard greens, to slinky red stockings with each family members name on them written in black permanent marker hanging over a humble fireplace, to an off-key rendition of "Silent Night" provided by her drunken Uncle Joe, to helping her younger cousins put out cookies and milk for Santa, and reading them a story before bed, hoping that they slept through the entire night.

Natalie became friends with three girls who lived on the same floor as she shortly after midterms were done. She knew that they weren't the kind of friends that would last her, and she could easily admit that their childish antics, especially in the pranks that they played on the boys that lived below them, would be something she wouldn't be able to stand in the long run. But Brie, short, big-headed and authoritative, Kina, wild and flirtatious, and Jasmine, big, loud, and entertaining, gave her enough laughs that could last her the rest of the year, and always encouraged her to dress better, wear a little make-up on her plain brown face, and never wasted time picking on her taste in R&B.

Yes, at times, they could be irritating, yes, they stayed in her room, more and longer than she wanted them to, and they invited the attention of too many boys. Nevertheless, they were

fun to be around, kept her on her toes, kept her from calling her mama every five seconds, kept her submersed in her cultural upbringing, kept her from being lonely.

"Come with us, Nat," Kina encouraged, busting into her room one Saturday night.

Brie followed shortly after. "Yes, finals are over...so now you have no excuses..."

There was a Christmas party after finals, at an apartment five minutes from campus. It was a part of Athens she'd only heard about but never, in her wildest dreams, expected to be. The area, not only served as a breeding ground for its vivacious and slightly dangerous drunken college fools, of any race, but served as a hotspot for law enforcement, who always seemed to get a kick out of breaking up as many parties as possible. A weekend didn't go by where her three hall mates returned to Allen with a riveting story about how they got chased by these guys or that group of guys, or how they barely escaped the cops' clutches.

The three girls, all dressed and ready to go, had to drag her out her dorm room.

"Damn it, Natalie, just come on," Jasmine said. "You'll have fun, I promise...and we won't let anything bad happen to you..."

She wasn't sure why she gave into them that night or why she felt bold enough to steal Sammy's slinky black shirt from her closet. It was the same shirt that Sammy had been wearing at the last party she'd gone to.

Jasmine, the only one of them that had a car, liked her music loud, loved to scream obscene rap music at the top of her lungs, and prided herself in being the largest of them. She was the dancer of them, could easily lure any black boy in this side of Georgia into her plus size web, using her curves and her shining smile to her advantage, wowing them with her knowledge of rap music.

For a week, Jas had bragged about being friends with the DJ, who was spinning at the party; some amazingly talented white boy who talked the slang, loved the music, and wasn't too bad to look at. Jas admitted that she'd met him awhile ago, at another party before Fall Break. She had expressed her love of rap, he had concurred, and a quick musical connection had been born.

That was the night that Natalie met Scotland Kelly, a soft-spoken, curly-headed something, with a slender frame, and a southern slouch. He'd come from behind the turntables that night, had removed his ridiculously large headphones from his ears, had shaken her hand firmly, smiling his pretty white bread smile.

"Natalie, nice to meet you, pretty girl," he'd said.

They called him Scotty, and he was known at all the black parties as "DJ K", and she learned that he got hired on a regular basis.

Scotty, from Memphis, was an old junior, had just turned twenty-two that November, and the sweetest drawl escaped his sandy-bearded mouth.

He was funny, flirted easily with Jas, and Natalie took a liking to him instantly, though she watched his interaction with Jas from afar.

Scotty had invited the four brown girls to his house the next night so that they could listen to some new music that he'd discovered. They, all eager, ignorant freshmen, all agreed to this, Natalie, noticing the expression on his face, indicating that he'd gotten many girls in the same fashion.

"Great," he'd said. "I'm sure that my roommates won't mind...they're never there...they're up their girlfriend's asses..."

"Where do you live?" Kina had asked.

"At a house on Trent road, a couple of miles from campus," he'd said. "The rent's really decent and the guys I stay with I've been friends with for years..."

"Even though they're up their girlfriend's asses?" Brie had teased.

Scotty laughed. "Yes...even though..."

"Are they as cool as you?" Kina had asked, tapping him lightly on the shoulder.

Scotty seemed to blush. "Well, I don't know about all of that...but they are definitely cool people...a couple of them are graduating this semester...it's pretty depressing...it'll only be me and my buddy, Brandon..."

Something clicked in Natalie's head.

Brandon...Trent road, house...

"Is this Brandon as cute as you are," Jasmine teased, pinching the boy's cheek tightly.

Scotty smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “I don’t judge dudes, but, see for yourself, he’s around here somewhere...”

Natalie felt a chill run through her. She certainly couldn’t picture the pinnacle of white privilege that was Brandon Greene being in an establishment such as this, but she turned her head anyway, spotted him up against the wall, standing alone, shrouded in darkness, people-watching.

She left her hall mates standing there, walked toward the lofty figure, looking a little uncomfortable, standing out more than anyone else there. He was dressed comfortably, appearing as if he’d attempted to blend in as much as possible. On the contrary, Natalie knew then, looking at him, that there would be nothing that the generous white prince could do to blend in – in any situation.

He caught her looking up at him, smiled a little, visibly loosening up his stiff stance.

“You,” he’d said over the loud music.

“Me...”

“I forgot to get your number...”

“It’s been months...”

“I noticed...got a little colder since the last time I saw you,” he said, grinning. “I see that you dressed appropriately this time...”

“I see that you don’t have a beer bottle this time...”

“You’re funny,” he said sarcastically. “No, I decided to cool it...actually, Scotty told me to cool it...”

“Not Sophia?”

“So hilarious, I swear,” he said. “Not Sophia...”

She remembered him smelling amazing that night.

“I just met Scotty,” she told him. “I like him already...my favorite roommate in the house on Trent road...”

Brandon’s eyes went to Scotty’s standing place. “Yes, he seems to have that effect on all the pretty girls...I can put you onto him...if you’re interested...”

“Oh, so he’s into the brown?”

“If you mean, has he dated girls of other races, then yes...”

Natalie followed Brandon’s gaze to Scotty. “Hmm, maybe...”

“Well, that’s great,” he said. “That’s my job tonight...I’m the wingman...which basically means that I have to stand here and steer all the pretty girls in his direction...”

“Doesn’t sound very fun,” she said, turning her lip up. “You can’t even keep one for yourself?”

“I’m generous,” he smiled. “Besides, working on being faithful, here...told you that...”

“Oh, right,” Natalie said. “So...is the competition stiff?”

Brandon looked her up and down. “Want the honest truth? You’re the prettiest girl I’ve seen here...”

“I’ve seen better...”

“That’s arguable...”

Natalie leaned against the wall with him. “Are you enjoying my company? My job is to make you as look comfortable as possible...”

“That’s a hard to position to fill,” he chuckled. “Do I look like I belong at a party like this? Do I know any of the music? Hell no. Do I know anyone here? A big hell no. Why am I here? Who the hell knows...”

“Do I look like I belong here?”

He looked down at her. “No, you look like you belong at home. Not around...hooligans...like this...”

“So...black people are hooligans? And who says that word?”

“My father,” he began. “And I wasn’t talking about black people...I was talking about drunken fools, like everyone in here except you and me...”

“Oh...do you feel left out?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m trying to be a good kid, like you...”

“That’ll take some time...”

“Exactly why I have to keep hanging around you...so some of your goodness can rub off on me...”

Natalie smiled. She’d lost sight of everything happening around her. How on earth did that happen?

“We’ll see what Sophia thinks of that...”

“Natalie Savannah—as in Georgia—Chandler...you’re just a myriad of jokes, aren’t you?”

“I told you...funniest person you’ve ever heard...”

“If you mean funny-looking, then I’ll agree...”

She punched him in the arm, watching him laugh at his own corny joke, and another song began to play.

“Tea, do you drink it?” He asked.

“If you mean sweet tea, then yes...”

“I mean hot tea, Natalie...”

“Never had it,” she said, shrugging her shoulders once.

“Must be a white thing...”

“Why does drinking tea have to be a racial thing?”

She couldn’t answer.

“I drink it when I’m at home with my parents...”

“Oh...so it’s a northern thing?”

“You’re making this a regional thing now?”

“Like I said, Brandon, I’ve never had any...”

“Well...let’s go get some...”

“It’s one in the morning...what’s open at one in the morning?”

“I know of a place...”

“You don’t want to stay here?” She asked.

“You don’t want to either...”

“I can’t leave my friends...”

“They’ll be fine...my car’s outside...”

Brandon took her wrist. She looked back. “What about Scotty?”

“He’ll probably go home with someone...the boy’s definitely on tonight...”

“He’s like that?”

“Oh, most certainly,” Brandon laughed. “Welcome to college...”

A small café stayed open late on the weekends, in a small corner of town. The interior was warm, inviting and the worn wooden floor creaked beneath their feet as they walked toward a small round table in the back, illuminated only by a single votive candle.

Brandon Greene ordered them two cups of chamomile tea, telling her that it was the same kind of tea his mother gave him and his brothers when they were young, when they couldn't go to sleep at night. He then got into the subject of how his mother's unfailing devotion made it hard for him to find a girl that could live up to those standards, explaining that his mother was everything, and anything in between, explaining that he'd do anything for her. She wanted to mention Sophia, wanted to ask why she wasn't that girl, what made her so great. But, she kept quiet, played with her nails nervously, didn't know him well enough to go probing through his personal business.

Their tea came quickly, and he instructed her on how she should drink it.

"Slowly," he'd coached. "Very slowly...you can take in the aromas and the flavor better that way..."

She felt funny then, sitting in front of someone with such sophistication, she, having hailed from a background that knew nothing better than how to eat all of the meat off of the chicken bone.

"It's good," she told him.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "Even though it's...a 'white thing'..."

"I'm sorry, did that offend you?"

"Of course not...things don't bother me the way they seem to bother you..."

"That's questionable..."

"I only go by what I see..."

They drank their tea silently for a few moments, Natalie looking at him periodically from across the small table, catching glimpses of his movements, each of them, slow and fluid...

"What are you doing for break?" he asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"Going home..."

"Which is where? You never told me..."

"Decatur..."

"That's not far..."

Natalie shook her head. "My mother's coming to get me on Monday...and you? What are your plans?"

Brandon sighed, placing his cup down, sighing, and whispering, "To the Baldwin Farm in Columbia, South Carolina"

"What for?"

"Oh, you know, Sophia Baldwin's family..."

"What do your parents say about this? Surely they don't want you to miss Christmas..."

"Oh, I'm going to Saratoga too...but Sophia wants to come with me...my parents absolutely adore her..."

"You don't seem too happy about it," she scoffed.

"I'm trying to be...but...it's soon, right? Spending Christmases together...that's serious, right?"

Natalie tapped the side of her cup. “Three years, Brandon...you two have been dating for three years, right?”

Brandon nodded. “Yes...three years...”

“I don’t know much about long term relationships,” she began. “Because I’ve never been in one...but I know that three years is a long time for things to not get serious...”

“Duly noted...”

“But I also believe that if you don’t want to do this, you shouldn’t have to,” Natalie said proudly. “No matter what your parents or her parents or what she says...it’s your life...”

Brandon looked at her. “That’s the smartest thing I’ve heard in years...”

“Shouldn’t be...it’s common sense...”

“You try and ask white people what the definition of common sense is and I guarantee you that you won’t get a direct answer...”

“I can see that,” she said.

“You know what, Natalie? I’m most certainly going to need your number now...I have to talk to you...I have to talk to someone with some pure, fucking, common damn sense!”

Natalie’s face curled. “You won’t get anything from me if you don’t fix that language...”

He huffed, smiled grandly, placed his cup down again and said, “Duly noted...”

. . .

She wasn’t sure what her academic advisor was thinking when she suggested that she register for a philosophy course

her second semester of her freshman year. After all, she was a biochemistry major who wanted nothing more than to take chemistry and biology and math classes till she felt content. Those things made sense to her. Philosophy required abstract thinking, required sitting there for long periods of time, thinking of why some things were logical and why others weren’t, or pondering the true meaning of life. She’d much rather sit down with a page full of equations in front of her, where she could easily figure out the steps and solve the problems without hesitation or frustration. Still, her advisor said that she certainly wouldn’t graduate if she didn’t take the course, and she figured that she might as well get it out of the way.

Natalie had had the most wonderful Christmas, which made it incredibly hard for her to have the desire to come back to the crammed dorm room she shared with Sammy and sometimes Billy, who, by the first of January had developed the nice habit of smoking weed. When Sammy came back to the room, she absolutely reeked of it, causing Natalie to crack the window above her bed, in thirty-degree weather.

“I don’t appreciate it that you come back in our room smelling of marijuana,” she wanted to tell her. *“You’re a stupid fool for getting involved with it! And you’re a stupid fool for getting involved with him! Where’s your sense, girl? Did you lose it in the cloud of pot smoke?”*

She sometimes wished she’d have an escape, somewhere off campus she could go, where peace and quiet prevailed.

She picked an afternoon class time, leaving her mornings free, where she could sleep in, because that’s when Sammy chose to take her classes. She would walk all the way to Old

College somewhere close to three, taking in the soft, chilly breeze of winter, counting the days till she got a break on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. She hugged her pea coat close, walked into the building, shoving past the students, scurrying to class, convening in the hallways, talking of their amazing Christmases.

She could relate.

She walked into 113; saw a packed classroom, and the desks filled up quickly. Her advisor had warned her of a surplus of transfer students, and the administration cutting back the amount of classes offered that spring semester of 2001. So, she felt incredibly lucky when she found a seat in the back, one of only two remaining in the class. The teacher arrived shortly following, and just as he began to shut the door, he pushed through the door, nearly knocking the poor old professor over, scrambling to find a seat, his books nearly slipping from his long arms. He wore a red crew-neck sweater, crisp jeans, and tousled black hair, appearing as if he'd just stepped out of an Abercrombie and Fitch winter catalogue. She wasn't sure why she thought it, but she understood why Sophia might have been so protective of him.

He spotted her like a break through the crowd, and he nodded. She, on the other hand, found it hard to swallow, and she created the image of them sitting in the café, sipping chamomile tea in hazy candlelight, while she listened to him spout his woes about his relationship.

She'd given him his number without expecting much from him. She detected a slight sense of flightiness in him, but he

did call, on Christmas Eve and on New Years, leaving voice-mails each time.

"I'm not so sure what the point was of giving me your phone number," he'd said. "But, it's me...I'm just calling to wish you a Merry Christmas...right now I'm stuck in Saratoga...my mother and Sophia are out doing last-minute shopping and I decided to stay behind...I needed someone to talk to...and you...and you...never mind...goodbye..."

She didn't answer the phone because she didn't know what they could possibly have to talk about. She wouldn't even give it a chance. He was different, starkly so, and she wasn't sure that she could handle having a friend like him.

He sat down in the empty desk beside her, setting his books down, looking flustered and sweaty. She looked at him in disbelief. She would assume then that only God could perform something this uncanny. She wasn't sure what she could say to him. Perhaps a quick 'Hello', and she'd turn her attention to the teacher. Act unfazed. Or maybe she would apologize for not returning his calls. Maybe he forgot about it. She would hope that he forgot.

What a jerk she was.

So, she remained silent, listened to Dr. Kelso, a semi-bald man with a potbelly and stained khakis, quote Socrates in a northern accent, and he stuttered to the point where she was sure his tongue would fall out. It wasn't until they simultaneously snickered about how loud the professor got, when explaining some random theory that she was sure no one knew what he was talking about.

It was at that point that they looked at each other, smiled, and he nodded his head again.

“You never called me back,” he whispered, pretending as if he were writing notes.

She didn’t want to tell him that she didn’t take his phone calls seriously, so she simply sighed, and said, “I’m sorry...”

“Yea, well,” he responded. “You should be.”

“How did your break go?”

Brandon glanced up at the front of the room to make sure that the professor wasn’t looking in his direction, then he leaned over his desk to get closer to her, and said, “Terribly...”

“How so?”

“My parents asked about the big ‘M’...”

“The what?”

“Marriage, Natalie, marriage...”

“And? Your response was?”

“What do you think it was?”

She pursed her lips. She simply couldn’t understand why he was still with her if he had no intentions of marrying the girl. How crazy! But she remained silent, reached for her notebook and pen and attempted to pay attention.

“We can’t be friends until you answer my phone calls,” he whispered to her.

She placed her pen atop her notebook and looked at him. “Who says I want that to happen?”

“I won’t take that personally...”

Natalie didn’t know what to say in return. She only faced forward.

“We should go get something to eat after this class,” he suggested in whisper.

“What’s with you and food,” she whispered in return, turning to him.

“I like to eat,” he told her, smiling confidently. “And I have a feeling that you do too...”

“You don’t know anything about me...”

“I know enough to know that I want to know you better,” he said, leaving her to her thoughts.

They went for pitas at the Greek place around the corner, that chilly afternoon. They spent the next few moments, sitting at a cramped table in the back of the small restaurant, talking about how Dr. Kelso made them laugh, and at how they were certain that they wouldn’t be able to understand a word that he said in the following weeks if he didn’t stop stuttering so hard.

“Maybe it’s just nerves,” Natalie suggested, wiping her fingers with a napkin.

“You think? Maybe he’s just crazy...most of them are...”

“That’s a nice thing to say...”

“Well, it’s the truth,” he said, shrugging his broad shoulders. “That’s why I couldn’t be a teacher...”

“And, what might you want to be?” she asked, pressing.

Brandon Greene shrugged his shoulders, as if he hadn’t given it much thought. “That’s a good question...”

“And what’s your major again?”

“Business Administration, the last time that I checked...”

“Was that a personal choice?”

He shook his head. “Of course not...I wanted to be an astronaut, but both my parents warded it off as a pipe dream... so...in order to run my father’s company one day, I need the business experience...”

“And? What does your father do?”

“My, my, don’t you ask a lot of questions?” he asked, looking surprised, his blue eyes bigger than she’d ever seen them.

She wouldn’t admit to him that she was curious about him, that she’d always been that way, but something had held her back from asking too many questions. There was almost a part of her that felt intimidated whenever he was around her.

“My father is a contractor and owns his own business,” Brandon said with a sigh. “All the way up in Saratoga. He’s been building houses for years...I always used to want to help him when I was younger. I guess he always thought that I’d be the one to take over the company when he retired.”

“How noble of you,” she said with a smile.

“Yea, well,” he sighed. “I suppose someone’s got to do it.”

Natalie took a sip of her juice and said, “An astronaut, huh?”

Brandon chuckled. “Yea, it sounds cheesy, but we visited the Kennedy Space Center one year and I was hooked...for an entire year, my wall was covered with stars, and planets were hanging from my ceiling and I begged my mom for this flimsy rocket ship that I saw in a toy store, that you could actually climb in. Yea, I would take naps in there, dressed in my astronaut suit.”

“So, you really were a loser,” Natalie concluded, nodding her head and looking at him teasingly.

She watched his cheeks flush crimson.

“Oh, really?” he began. “You’ve never wanted to be anything so bad that you’d take it that far?”

Sure she had. She remembered when Mama bought her an actual stethoscope for her seventh birthday and she’d go around the brick bungalow, placing the cool metal on her mother’s heart, listening to her heartbeat on cool, rainy autumn afternoons, when she wasn’t working. She would sneak up on her grandmother as she slept, would play doctor while Sidney played nurse, and three-year-old Maya played the patient. Natalie would examine her little sister, the way the doctor did to her, while Sidney tried to steal it away from her, making her cry when she was successful. Yes, for as long as she could remember, being a doctor was all she’d dreamed about, was all she’d ever wanted. Being a doctor meant that she could be a hero like Wonder Woman. She could make enough money so that her family didn’t have to work, didn’t have to worry about struggling.

“I’ve wanted to be a doctor,” she admitted to him quietly, playing with the napkin, twisting it between her fingers.

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

He seemed pleased with the answer, nodded slightly, and said, “I can tell...”

“You can?”

He nodded again. “I can tell that you’re smart and that you’re giving...you’d make a perfect doctor...”

“I could be evil...a complete you-know-what...”

He shook his head this time. “No, trust me, everything that I need to know about you is in your eyes...”

Who was this boy, really? Thinking that he could see things in her eyes? What lines he was feeding her! He must think that she’s stupid. Yes, that’s it, stupid and crazy...

But, she was walking beside him on North Campus, beneath a blue January sky, a chilly breeze, and crisp air, heading in the direction of the Arch, surrounded by fading green shrubbery. It was then that Sophia called his cellular phone, probably demanding to know where he was, but he surprisingly gave her no clues. He only told her that he’d talk with her later, probably something she certainly didn’t want to hear, but did anyway. Natalie hated admitting that she was relieved, that she was enjoying his company, his laughter, and the fresh winter air and sky far too much to let him go now.

Yes, she was stupid and crazy.

But, heck, shouldn’t she get used to it? Seeing him a lot. After all, they did share the same philosophy class, and she was certain that she’d need his help. After all, he had to be good at that stuff. She didn’t like the feeling, but she liked the way he thought. He was easy, cool, peaceful, reminded her of the fresh air they walked upon. And he would be her key to getting a decent grade in that class. So, maybe she would pretend to enjoy his company, answer a couple of his phone calls, maybe hang out with him a little. He was an alright type of guy, surely not someone she could see herself developing some long-term,

drawn out friendship with, right? She would simply enjoy his company for the duration of the semester; hope that it didn’t last too long.

In the weeks following, she found herself stressing more and more about that philosophy class, and less and less about her advanced chemistry class. She felt that her future lied in those four walls, with Dr. Kelso and his balding and his stuttering, with Brandon sitting next to her, distracting her, passing her notes as if they were in middle school.

Food later?

What the hell is Kelso talking about?

Did you read for this class?

If she failed the class she would blame him, no question. He, on the other hand, breezed through the lessons, raising his hand, spouting his opinion of existentialism and the Enlightenment, and why knowledge was this and why knowledge was that, gaining the good doctor’s praise.

“Good job, Mr. Greene,” he’d tell Brandon, smiling cheekily. “I see you did your reading. You’ve saved the class yet again from another pop quiz...”

Brandon, the Hero.

He never read, of course. He just knew it - everything about it.

You come with me to my chemistry class, she thought one day, and then I’ll be the hero!

When he wasn't spending time whining on the phone with Sophia, cursing at her, arguing with her about pointless things, he was calling her, letting out all of his stress on her, or whatever else was on his mind. And she'd listen. Lord, have mercy, she'd listen, and she didn't know why.

"My rent is due next month, and I'm flat broke...how am I supposed to pay my rent? If I can't, can I move in with you?"

"No..."

"I'll be living on the streets then...I'll be one of those homeless people that sneaks into the library and sleeps on the bathroom floor..."

"That'll teach you humility..."

"You're not funny..."

"I'm not trying to be...I hear the bathrooms are quite...accommodating..."

And she didn't know why she invited him over to her dorm one weekday night sometime shortly before midnight, when her roommate was gone.

Inviting boys up to your room, Natalie?

He brought a large pizza with him. "I hope you like pepperoni," he said. "I love pepperoni..."

Luckily she did, too. He was dressed as casually as she'd ever seen him, grey pajama pants and a red Bulldogs pullover, hair tousled. She wasn't sure why she invited him over, but she liked him being there. The dorm was just a little too quiet. Something about his presence eased her.

She was pleased that he brought the food, because she was starved. She hadn't had anything at all to eat that day, and it

was as if (in some strange cosmic way), he knew that, and delivered, with the best smelling pizza she'd ever encountered. Natalie wasted no time in picking up three slices from the box, before Brandon could even remove his pullover.

"Wow," he said, his eyes enlarged. "I'm assuming that you were hungry..."

She didn't want to tell him that she'd used up all of her meal plan meals for that month and was short on cash. That would have been rather embarrassing. Instead, she swallowed her first bite, nodded and said, "Yes, and pizza was the best thing for my hunger..."

Brandon only smiled. "Well, then...lucky you, lucky me..."

Natalie swallowed her next bite and said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly..."

"Where's Sophia...it's after midnight...won't she be worried?"

Brandon lowered his slice of pizza. "I told her that I was bar-hopping with Scotty...she's out with her sorority sister's somewhere...I'm sure I'll get a drunken phone call from her sometime soon..."

"She's a sorority girl?"

"Yes...if you saw her, you'd be able to tell...she's a Kappa Kappa Gamma girl...and I can't stand going out with her and her snobby friends..."

Natalie chuckled. "That surprises me..."

"Oh yea," he said, grinning slightly. "And why is that?"

“I always took you for a frat-boy, sorority girl and panty-raid loving type of guy...”

“Oh, ok, great, so you typecast me because of the way I dress and where I come from?”

Natalie shrugged. “Guilty as charged...”

“For your information, I hate the pompous assholes that hang around on our campus...they’re rude, obnoxious...and what if I typecast you? Would you like that?”

“Try me...”

“How would you feel if I told you that when I first saw you, I thought you were one of those neck-popping, finger-snapping, honk-if-you-love-Jesus, Praise the Lord, loud, annoying freshman girls...similar to the ones you brought to that party last semester...”

“Point taken...”

“But no...I’m trying to get to know you first, aren’t I? And from what I know...you’re incredibly intelligent, painfully quiet, slightly nerdy, and you act like you don’t need anyone...not the aforementioned type of girl...”

“Well, thank you...”

“You’re welcome...”

“And you’re not so bad yourself...”

“Thank you...”

Natalie took another bite of her slice and said, “But you don’t necessarily have to get to know me...”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes,” Natalie said with a sigh. “We could keep this strictly academic...you know, with our philosophy class and all...”

“I see...”

“Once the semester ends, you can go your way, and I can go mine...”

Brandon nodded, she assumed that he was convinced, instead, he cleared his throat and said, “You know...I don’t bring pizza to just anyone...I don’t lie to my girlfriend for just anyone either...”

“I didn’t ask you to do either of those things...”

“You really try to make it difficult, don’t you?”

“Certainly,” she said. “When I am unsure of one’s intentions...”

He sighed heavily, clicked his teeth and said, “You’re right...you’re absolutely right...I didn’t have to do those things, did I? I could go and hang out with my girlfriend, or I could have actually gone to the bar with Scotty...but no...I’m sitting in a freshman’s dorm room, eating pizza on this disgusting floor...what does that mean to you, Chandler? Does that mean that I’m trying to get something from you? Not in my book...”

“Now you’re really trying to make it difficult, aren’t you?”

“I want to be your friend,” he told her with wide and persistent eyes.

“Why?” she asked quietly.

He smiled. “Because I still feel guilty for knocking you out...”

...

“Come with me,” he told her after class that following Friday.

“I can’t, we have a test on Monday,” she replied as they exited the building. “If I fail this test, then I’ll have to repeat the course and I can’t afford to be behind...”

“Study on Saturday,” he suggested. “We can study together...”

“You don’t study,” she said to him. “You don’t study and you upset me because you don’t study...”

“I’ll study,” he assured her. “Just come with me...”

“Why is it so important that I come?” she asked him, narrowing her eyes at him. “Won’t your roommate be there?”

“Yes...but...”

“But...what?”

“Natalie, stop making it so difficult,” he said with the roll of his eyes. “I know you want to come with me...”

“I’m only eighteen,” she reminded him. “I’m not old enough...”

“Yes, you are,” he told her. “Trust me...”

“I don’t have anything to wear,” she said.

“It’s not a wedding,” he said. “It’s this little place in Atlanta that Scotty loves...he wants me to try it out...”

“So...go...”

“You’re coming with me...”

“I won’t like the music...”

“How do you know that? What’s with you and boundaries?”

“Boundaries? What boundaries?”

“If anything’s remotely different then you refuse to try it out,” he explained. “It’s practically impossible for you to ever try something new...”

“Not true...”

“Oh, no? Well, prove me wrong, Chandler,” he said.

They stopped and faced each other. He folded his arms. “Come to Halley’s with me and prove to me that you’re willing to try new things...”

“You’re crazy...I’m not going all the way to Atlanta with you and your roommate...”

“You don’t trust us?”

Natalie eyed him.

“You’ll be safe, I promise,” he assured her quietly. “We’re not bad guys...I thought you would have known that by now...”

“Don’t you have a girlfriend?”

Brandon seemed slightly peeved then, as if the question had been completely ludicrous, as if she should have kept her mouth shut in the first place.

“Yes, I do,” he admitted. “But she hates going places with Scotty and me, and I’m not really into hearing her whine again this time...”

“You think I won’t whine?”

“No,” he began with a sigh. “You’ll be so wrapped up in how much fun you’re having...”

“We’ll see about all of that...”

She didn't tell Brandon that she loved the city. After all, living in Decatur did have its advantages. She had the skyscrapers within her reach, had the horns of impatient vehicles within earshot, with the smell of food floating in the air from restaurants sweeping past her nose. She didn't tell him that part of her couldn't wait to go, that a small part of her enjoyed anticipating the unexpected. Giving Brandon the advantage over her thoughts and feelings wasn't something she was ready for just yet.

She hadn't been this concerned about what she wanted to wear since her friend Dominique's graduation party the year before. She'd garnered ample affection for Kenneth Pierce since the eighth grade. She'd first admired his skin, which reminded her of smooth, dark chocolate, then his basketball playing skills, then his smile. When Dominique had informed her that Kenny might have felt the same way about her, a few nights before graduation, she was far more than elated, and couldn't remember being that happy since she made the honor roll in the ninth grade. It was the night of Dominique's party that Kenny gave her, her first real kiss by the tiki torches in her friend's backyard, beneath balmy May stars.

"You're so pretty," he'd whispered into her face. "I've wanted to do this since we rode the bus together eighth grade..."

She didn't stop blushing until she moved into her dorm room in Allen hall a couple of months later.

Jasmine picked out her clothes for her.

"Here," she'd told her, pulling down a pair of dark-washed jeans from a hanger in her narrow closet. Jill Scott crooned in the background. "You look nice in these..."

Jas continued to rummage through her pitiful wardrobe, her eyes narrowed ardently, biting her lip back.

"Here," she said again, pulling down a simple, black cowl neck sweater. "This looks good on you too..."

Jas sat on her bed as she slipped on the clothes selected.

"You're the only girl?" Jas asked her.

Natalie nodded. "Yea, I guess so..."

"He must really like you..."

"Who?"

"Scotty's roommate," she told her. "He must really like you..."

Natalie scoffed. "That's nonsense...we're barely even friends..."

"Well, isn't that the same guy that you left the party with before break?"

Natalie stopped moving for a moment. She'd assumed that her hall mates, Jasmine especially, had forgotten about the fact that Natalie had left with some strange white boy and didn't think to tell them where she'd ran off to.

"Well...yea..."

"I think he likes you," Jas said with a sly grin.

Natalie felt her cheeks warm. "Please, he has a girlfriend..."

"Really? That's a shame..."

"They've been dating for almost three years..."

“So, he’s committed...”

“And, he’s twenty-one...”

“He’s gorgeous...that’s what he is...”

“Really? I hadn’t really noticed...”

“You’re lying...”

“Am not...” Natalie continued to dress herself.

“Natalie Chandler, I’ve only seen him once and he took my breath away...”

“Jas, now you’re just being silly...”

“I might be, just a little. But, is it just me or is it strange that a boy who seems to be so serious about his girlfriend, doesn’t invite her?”

“He said that she didn’t like going with him and his Scotty...”

“Humph, or so he told you...”

“You’re making a bigger deal out of this than necessary...”

“But, you claim that you barely know him...”

Natalie didn’t lie about that. She barely knew this Brandon Greene. But, she could understand Jasmine’s need to speculate. The situation surrounding her involvement with him looked as peculiar as it sounded. But, in rare cases, she’d become a sucker for curiosity; she secretly wanted to discover the Brandon outside of philosophy class, away from the beer bottle, away from the mystifying Sophia.

He called at eight to say that he was on his way.

“Are you ready?” he’d asked her.

“Of course I am...”

“I’m surprised that you haven’t backed out yet...”

She was surprised herself. But she took a deep breath, rolled her eyes, and quietly said, “I’m ready...come and get me...”

He arrived a few minutes following the phone conversation, in Scotty’s black Yukon. She slid onto a leather seat in the back, shut the door behind her, and settled in to the sound of mellow hip-hop, Scotty beating his hands on his steering wheel, and Brandon looking right at her with his eyebrows raised.

“Surprised?” she asked him, clutching her black leather purse close.

“Pleasantly,” he told her. “You look nice...”

Natalie gave herself a quick glance then looked at him again. “Nothing serious...”

“I beg to differ,” he told her, looking at Scotty. “Do you remember Natalie?”

Scotty looked back at her, clean-shaven with gel in his short, curly hair. “Oh yea, the chick from the party before break...nice to see you again...”

“Likewise,” Natalie replied quietly.

“Are you ready to go,” he asked her.

Natalie nodded slowly. She was as ready as she’d mentally prepared herself for.

It took them two hours to get into the city, beneath the twinkling lights of the skyscrapers, below a clear, black starlit sky. It was two hours worth of The Scotty and Brandon Com-

edy Hour, in which they spent most of it commenting on how ugly certain girls had been on a bar venture the night before, or how drunk they'd been. Natalie quietly observed.

Brandon was funny, she concluded. She tried to keep herself from laughing when he talked about the plump girl who grinded on him, offered her number, and told him how sexy she thought he was. He couldn't concentrate on anything else but the fact that one of her large breasts was mere centimeters from falling out of her dress, and she had deposits of bright red lipstick caked onto her two front teeth.

It took them almost another hour, once they'd reached downtown, to find a parking space. Scotty was reluctant to pay for parking, which seemed the inevitable choice, and as he coursed through the bustling city streets, Brandon ranted, "You stupid bastard, you just passed a good parking space right there...there goes another one! Scotty, are you fucking blind? Look...you just passed another one!"

"Are you fucking blind, you overgrown twit? It clearly said 'Twenty-four Hour Towing'...I'm taking you to get your fucking eyes checked..."

Brandon hit his arm. "Not in front of the girl, you dick..."

"Like saying 'dick' is any better," Scotty said. "And I'm sorry, Miss Natalie...your friend Brandon is probably the dumbest person that ever walked the face of the earth..."

"You just wait until we get out of this car," Brandon told him, glancing out the window. "I'll show you how dumb I am..."

"Scotty," Natalie began quietly. "Aren't you being a little loose with the word 'Friend'...?"

Scotty laughed.

Brandon looked back at her. "So, we're not friends?"

"I don't think that that was ever established..."

"Fine then, we're not," Brandon concluded. "I will no longer supply you with free pizza..."

"I can live without it..."

"I think I like her, Brandon," Scotty chuckled. "I like you, Natalie..."

"I think I like you too, Scotty..."

Brandon said nothing more.

"You'll like Halley's, Natalie," Scotty told her, slowly wrapping an arm around her. They walked along the sidewalk, felt a biting chill in the air. "They play the best music that I've heard in my entire life..."

"Don't let him fool you," Brandon told her, folding his arm. "He only goes here for the booze and boobs..."

"Why must you be so vulgar when there's a lady present? Where's your home training? From now on, Natalie, stay by me...I'll protect you..."

Natalie and Brandon met eyes. She then allowed her eyes to roam the length of his body for a fleeting moment. He liked to wear black. And it looked good on him. His black hair and black outfit created a startling silhouette, and she was certain at that moment that only he could pull something like that off. She wouldn't dare tell him so; there was something so comfort-

ing about keeping her distance from him...at least, for the time being.

Halley's was located down a flight of steep, rickety stairs, down a long, moist corridor, where the bass knocked against its tattered walls. Scotty still had his arm around her as they entered the main room, shadowed and amber lit, stale, people-heavy and loud. There was a main hardwood dance floor; an elevated disc jockey booth off to the side and a series of plush couches set beneath canopies, enclosed by a series of freestanding candleholders.

"Looks like I picked a great night to go," Scotty began with a pleased smile. "What do you think, Natalie?"

Natalie wasn't sure the moment she stood there, staring at all of the people. She felt a shrinking feeling inside of her and she strangely appreciated Scotty's embrace.

"Natalie's just hoping that she doesn't get hit in the head with a bottle again," Brandon teased, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Isn't that right?"

Maybe. She only hoped that they wouldn't abandon her as her silly roommate had done the previous semester. Perhaps they could be her guards, to shield her from any incoming, aerial bottle attacks.

They found a couch in the back, away from the rest of the crowd. Natalie sat next to Brandon. She wasn't sure why she watched him, watched his eyes survey the crowd, as he rhythmically tapped his fingers against the upholstery. She studied him as if he was the most fascinating person in the room, and she dreaded the moment that he'd turn and catch her staring at

him. There was a sense of peace about him. She witnessed his slow inhales and his exhales, his slow blinking. There was something different about his attitude, as if he had been previously conscious of his Pretty Boy image and wanted to strip himself of the disposition immediately. There was something urbane about his essence that she was certain she'd missed before. The darkness that shrouded his figure attracted her eyes for more than a fleeting interval, and the music that played over the speakers seemed to suit him and her frame of mind. It was quiet and jazzy, melodic and smooth...

"You can stop staring at me now," he said suddenly, turning his head to her.

Startled, she quickly turned her eyes away, lowered them and pretended to search through her purse. "I don't know what you're talking about," she murmured.

"I have good peripheral vision," he told her. "These eyes aren't big for no reason..."

"Sorry," she said, feeling her cheeks warm.

"I believe that only 'friends' are allowed to stare at one another," he whispered teasingly. "And you made that painfully clear that we weren't such..."

Surely he knew that she'd lied. She looked at him.

"I accept apologies free of charge," he smiled.

"I was only kidding..."

"I hope so," he replied. "I don't drunkenly complain to just anyone...didn't you realize that?"

"Pardon my ignorance..."

"Pardon accepted..."

They smiled at one another as the song changed, as they sat bathed in ambient light.

“I lied to you,” he told her.

“Yea?”

“Guilty as charged,” he sighed. “I have been here before...”

“Friends don’t lie to one another,” Natalie reminded him.

“We can have a fresh start,” he advised. “I just really wanted you to come...you looked like you needed a little...fresh air...”

“And how’d you guess that?”

“Chandler, your eyes tell more than you want them to,” he whispered to her.

She wasn’t sure that she liked knowing that he studied her eyes. Suddenly, Jasmine’s words struck her: “But, is it just me or is it strange that a boy who seems to be so serious about his girlfriend, doesn’t invite her?”

“And what about Sophia?”

“What about her?”

“Don’t you study her eyes?”

He sighed. “Yes, once upon a time, I did...”

She nodded and looked toward the crowd, who rocked to the music slowly.

“Why do you ask about her so much?” he inquired.

Because she started to wonder if she even existed. She kept quiet and thought about delivering a better answer to him. She glared at him. She wouldn’t tell him that she was strangely and utterly curious about the girl who he had no trouble mention-

ing every time he opened his mouth, the girl who obviously had his heart in her tight clutches, who gave him more grief than any other relationship that she knew. It was all connected to wanting to know more about him.

Why she cared so much, she would never understand.

Natalie only shrugged her shoulders like an impish child.

“I’m just...curious...”

“Just curious?”

She nodded in reply. “Just...curious...”

He sighed. “There’s not much to her, I suppose...”

“Blond, beautiful...”

“A deadly combination in my eye,” Brandon continued.

“That combination will make you do things you never thought you’d ever do...”

Natalie wanted him to elaborate, but he never did. He only stared blankly.

“Miss Natalie,” Scotty called out to her, his hands extended in her direction. Scotty had gone to the disc jockey’s booth earlier to talk with a few of his friends. “I would be honored if you’d join me on the dance floor for the next number...”

Sheepishness filled her insides, and she bashfully shook her head in refusal.

Scotty’s face fell. “C’mon, Nat, I know you got a few moves in you...”

Sure she did. The music was so nice, so smooth, so calm, so inviting. She wasn’t sure she could stand for Brandon staring

at her the entire time. There was something about him watching her, studying her that unnerved her to fright.

“Go ahead, Natalie,” Brandon encouraged. “He doesn’t bite...”

She smiled. “I’ll go...if you go...”

“You’ve got yourself a challenge...”

“Just pick some random girl,” she offered. “That is, if Sophia approves...”

“Ha, ha,” Brandon said, rolling his eyes.

“I still like her, Brandon,” Scotty said, laughing.

Brandon seemed to have no trouble finding a dance partner. Natalie felt foolish. It seemed that she wasn’t the only one who fell victim to his natural gravitational pull. Natalie watched as he, completely oblivious to his eye-catching status, strolled along the bar, and she witnessed more than five or six girls glare at him as he strode past, whispering to their friends who sat next to them. Brandon’s eyes settled on a blond who sat on one of the last stools. They exchanged small talk, and Brandon reached for her hand and proceeded to pull her off of the stool.

“You’re a nice dancer,” Scotty said.

So was he. Scotty Kelly lived up to his cultural hype. His movements were fluid and easy, and he seemed to have no inhibitions about twirling her here and twirling her there.

“I’m glad that Brandon brought you,” he admitted. “The last girl he brought was Sophia...and between you and me... she’s a bitch...”

Natalie felt herself laugh. She found it strangely comforting that Brandon’s secret lover wasn’t perfect.

“So, you’re the Beer Bottle Girl?”

Great, as much as she’d tried to avoid it, she still got associated with alcohol.

She wasn’t sure why she had to defend herself. And she became angry with Brandon then. Had he said something obscene about her? She most certainly didn’t want to be placed in the “whore” category. She had nothing but respect for his girlfriend.

“I completely understand your relationship with him,” Scotty said soothingly.

“You do?”

“Yes...if you were some slut, he wouldn’t have invited you here...”

“That’s comforting...”

“Actually, if you don’t mind me saying...he wanted to hook us up...”

Natalie felt her heart stop. “He wanted to what?”

“He gave me your number,” Scotty explained. “I hope that’s alright. I’ve been too chicken to call, so he figured that this would be a good opportunity for us to hang out and get to know each other...he thought we’d be perfect together...”

She excused herself to the bathroom mere seconds later, pushed her way into an empty stall and shut the door behind her. She could feel the anger climb her limbs, fill her body, warm her cheeks. This had been a setup! Did he think that she

could be so easily pawned off? Did he think that she was so pathetic that she couldn't find someone of her own? Did he not know that she didn't need anybody? Or maybe he thought that she'd give it up as easily as Jasmine had done with Scotty just before Christmas break. Jasmine still bragged about her nightly endeavors with the cute, white DJ! Did that Brandon Greene simply think that she was that easily swayed?

She exited the bathroom and Brandon stood on the other side of it with his arms crossed.

"I was wondering where you ran off to," he said. "You make it very hard to keep you safe with you disappearing like that..."

She started to tap her foot like her mother. She crossed her arms at her chest and narrowed her eyes.

"What? Did they run out of toilet paper?"

She nodded. She figured she would accept the nickname for the time being...

"You're the girl that Brandon likes to whisk off places."

Natalie quickly shook her head. "It's not like that, you see...we're barely even friends..."

She grumbled something indecipherable and moved past him, tossing her arms in the air.

He reached for her arm and pulled her back. "Whoa, whoa...what was that for?"

"I see why you wanted to be my 'friend' so badly," she sniped. "So you could set up the Brandon Greene Dating Service for the Young and Pathetic..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Giving him my number? This whole thing was a setup, wasn't it? This whole semester, you've been trying to butter me up with the friend crap so you could set me up with your friend?"

"So, you consider yourself pathetic?"

"Don't mock me..."

"I'm not...you're a pretty girl, he's a good-looking guy... the connection only made sense..."

"Yes, yes, I think you're right," she replied. "Dating a white boy who pretends to be black, who had sex with one of my friends the same night that I met him...yes, makes all of the sense in the world..."

"Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"All bitter and hateful and touchy?"

"Great, now you're belittling me?"

"Natalie, look, he's a great guy..."

"Good, then Jasmine can have him..."

And she walked away.

Scotty got so drunk that not only could he not drive his own car, Brandon and Natalie were forced to drag him the four blocks back to the parking lot where the SUV was, beneath a quiet sky, flashing lights and a frosty draft.

They hadn't spoken to each other since their bathroom spat, which left them with the only power to give zealous, odious stares in one another's direction.

Brandon laid his best friend, who still spouted drunken rants and laughter, along the backseat.

“Brandon, Brandon...I love you, man...have I told you that lately? I love you, man...you’re the greatest...and Natalie? Natalie fuckin’ Chandler...I love you too, girl!”

He then climbed behind the steering wheel, Natalie in the front passenger seat, and commenced roaming through the quiet streets of the city. The Pharcyde sang, “You can’t keep running away” from the speakers...

“You must have a lot of respect for me,” Natalie mumbled, her arms crossed at her chest.

“Here you go again,” Brandon replied, huffing.

“I’m just saying...why him?”

“He’s just drunk right now,” he told her. “You can’t hold that against him...”

“I can’t?”

“We’re sorry if we aren’t as perfect as you, Natalie Chandler...”

“So, this is where our friendship ends, right? I can’t rely on a friendship that revolves around deceit...”

“Then, you’ll be a lonely person, Ms. Chandler...”

He pulled into the driveway of the house on Trent road and killed the engine. “I just want to put him to bed before I take you home...it’ll only take a second...you can stay in the car if you’d like...”

Natalie shook her head. So, she and Brandon drug a passed out Scotty into the dark house, down the short corridor

and into Scotty’s room. They tossed Scotty on his bed, Brandon said, “Here you go, Buddy,” and clapped his hands together. When she slid on a stack of records, he reached for her hands and wrapped himself around her to balance her.

“You’re okay,” he coached as he got her back to her feet.

She followed him to the kitchen.

“I just want to grab something to drink,” he whispered in moon-bathed shadow. “Is that alright?”

She nodded. She watched as he retrieved a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator, popped it open and took a few gulps.

“There,” he said, replacing the carton in the refrigerator. “Much better...”

They exited the house together, got back into the car and as he stuck his key in the ignition, he whispered, “I know you probably hate me right now...but, do you want to go with me somewhere?”

“Are you crazy? It’s freezing...”

“I’ll make it a short trip, I promise...”

Natalie wanted to blame curiosity as the root to all of her attraction to establishing a friendship with Brandon Greene. There was an unfathomable pull toward him, as if he single-handedly held the key to all of the exciting possibilities that her college experience could potentially offer her.

She studied his face. Common sense at the moment would have told him to take her home that instant, where she could be away from him. After all, it was after two in the morning, and she wanted to get plenty of sleep, so that she could wake

up and study for her test that she was certain that she would fail. However, her undying inquisitiveness told her stick with him, see it out.

She nodded, and soon after, he was pulling out of the short driveway in Scotty's black SUV.

She rode for hours it seemed, drove for miles and miles, tracking through the night, along empty streets, through a whistling draft and silence. And Musiq Soulchild crooned of a girl next door from Scotty's radio. There was peace around them, a certain kind that she hadn't felt since she left the countryside, the stillness and consistency that ensued.

She was completely unsure why she trusted him. In any ordinary situation, she would be tired of his whisking her away, of him attempting to take her here and attempting to take her there. But heck, if this is what garnered a "friendship" with him, then she would accept it, right?

Brandon parked the vehicle at a twinkling overlook an hour later.

"Come with me," he quietly demanded.

So, she did. They exited truck together.

"Here, let me help you," he offered, reaching for her waist. She stopped his hands, said, "It's okay, I've got it," and slid onto the hood of the truck herself. He followed suit. Parked against an incline, they could see clearly a vast field ahead of them, moon-shadowed, with overgrown grass, swaying in the wind. Above were the stars in a quiet sky. At a curve in the field, they could see Athens' lights ahead. The smell of burning wood floated in the air.

Natalie expected nothing less from him, she was sure of it. She concluded that no one else but Brandon could whisk her to Atlanta and the countryside in the capacity of one night.

"What do you think?" he asked her quietly.

She was no less than pleased, surely. "It's nice," she replied.

"I thought so too," he agreed, smiling. "This is what comes with being friends with me..."

"I see," she said. "Is this what you do for all of your friends?"

He laughed a little. "Maybe so...maybe not...nevertheless, I'm sorry..."

"For what?"

"How quickly you forget," he told her. "About trying to set you up...I just saw an opportunity and I ran with it..."

"Oh..."

"Besides, I just figured that if you weren't dating my best friend, then I would never get to see you...we would never be friends..."

"You have my number," she admitted. "I have nowhere to hide from you now..."

"And so does Scotty..."

"Yes, so does he," Natalie said, looking at him. "Well, since you have my number...you can call me and we can hang out..."

"Really? You can promise that?"

"I think I can...you just name it, then I'll be there..."

"Glad you say that," he began. "Because I think I want to start hanging out with you tomorrow night..."

“Sure, if it involves studying...”

He chuckled. “I was thinking something more along the lines of a movie or a party...”

“No parties...”

“You’ve only been to two...”

“That’s the only two I want to go to...”

“You’ll enjoy this one...”

“Can you promise that?”

“Actually, I think that I can...”

. . .

They’d spent the majority of the following Saturday in the library, going over John Stuart Mill and his ideas of Utilitarianism, and Libertarianism and Hospers.

“No, no,” Brandon would try to explain to her. “It’s the Pleasure Principle...not this...you’re thinking too hard, Nat... just try seeing it in a simpler way...if you do that then there’s no way that you’ll fail, trust me...”

They rewarded themselves by going to the party on Jackson Avenue, in a worn brick house with dark blue shutters, and an oversized UGA flag waving in the front. As alternative music played, Natalie found comfort and common ground with Brandon in standing in a corner, laughing at how silly drunk people looked and acted. It was Natalie’s suggestion.

“You’re right,” he’d told her. “This is much better than getting drunk...did I look this stupid on my birthday?”

“Yes, I can honestly say that you did...”

“Well, I’m even more sorry than I was before...”

Natalie locked her arm with his.

Afterwards, they went back to their spot at the overlook and watched the stars. Natalie talked of her ambitions, of her fears, of who she was, of where she came from. She was a sweet, country girl, who wanted nothing more than to get her education, and pay back her mother for all of the great things that she’d given to her over the years.

Brandon talked of his future, which, of course, included a concise discussion of Sophia’s importance to him, how they met, and why he loved her so much. There was something unfailingly sincere about him, something expressive, something vulnerable. And Natalie soaked it in. In the peaceful whispers of the night, she’d learned that Sophia was his first love, that Sophia was his first secure relationship, that, although Sophia had high hopes of their marriage to one another one day, he was more than skeptical, more than fearful, more than unwilling.

And Natalie only listened. That was what she was best at: listening. She felt that listening to a friend’s woes was much more satisfying than trying to administer advice. They sat on the hood of the green Explorer for hours, it seemed, reminding her of the first night that they met. It astonished her as to how much two people could grow together in a matter of days, minutes it seemed. Natalie, who once detained a fear of the disparity between them, allowed it to subside at that moment beneath the stars.

Chapter 4

BRANDY



THE HOUSE ON TRENT ROAD became her second home.

She got more of her studying done there than she ever could in the library or in her dorm room, where her roommate and her pitiful boyfriend still prevailed. She was there during the week, with her books in tow, coming over to teach Brandon how to cook a meal, she was there on the weekends, watching reruns and ordering pizza. She generally was there when Sophia wasn't, whenever she was bored and needed someone to talk to, or when Brandon needed someone to vent to about Sophia's many rants of his behavior.

"Where do you go every night, Natalie?" Sammy asked her as they watched a rerun.

She wanted to tell her roommate that she'd finally found a place of peace, her place of escape. Instead, she chose to be as secretive as possible; she got a kick out of being a young woman of mystery.

"Just someplace," she said quietly.

If she wasn't sure of how important Brandon was to her, she most certainly realized it the Friday night that Scotty called her from Brandon's phone, early into her sophomore year. It had been a slow night for her and she, who had chosen to stay in her dorm room, and lounge on her bed, watched television. She'd just dosed off when her cellular phone rang. She didn't answer it initially, couldn't think of one person that she wanted to talk to that late at night. When it rang again, she grew nervous, thinking it could be someone

from her family. She rolled over groggily, slid off the bed, and went to retrieve the small device off her desk.

She'd cleared her throat, and had answered no more than above a whisper.

"Yes? What do you want?"

"Natalie, it's me, Scotty."

She, who leaned against the desk for support, now raised her body, opened her eyes a little more, thinking the worst immediately. If the way her stomach churned wasn't an indication that she cared for the boy, then surely her heart pounding was.

"What's up?" she'd responded.

"It's Brandon..."

There was a lot of noise in the background, and a couple of times, she swore she heard Brandon, attempting to yell into the phone.

"Clearly," Natalie said.

"Did I wake you?"

"That's not important right now," she told him. "What's wrong with him?"

"He told me to call you," Scotty said. "He told me that he wanted to see you..."

Natalie huffed. "And it couldn't wait till morning?"

"He said it was important..."

“Scotty...”

She heard Scotty clear his throat, and in a very low voice, told her, “He’s been drinking, Nat...”

“And you can’t drive?”

“No,” he told her. “But if I could, I would drop him off by the dorms. Natalie, he’s really messed up, and he won’t shut up, and he won’t leave the bar until he sees you...”

“Good, Lord,” Natalie sighed. “Alright, alright...tell him that I’m on my way...”

She was allowed to bring her car to school that year if she promised to take care of it. It was her sister Sidney’s old car; a small, black, Toyota Camry. It donned a cracked headlight and the engine had a tendency to overheat in hot temperatures, and did absolutely nothing year-round but sit in their driveway at home, taking up space. Her younger sister Maya, barely a high school senior, who’d only been driving their mother’s tan minivan for over a year, wanted it for herself, but her mama had given it to Natalie, because she was older, far more responsible and needed it the most.

She barely drove it, wanted to conserve as much gas as possible, kept the tank full at all times, and tried to keep the car looking as pristine as possible. The only times that she did drive it were when she got hungry and had forgotten to go to the grocery store, or when she was driving into downtown to buy a book from Greg’s Book Shoppe on Foundry Street.

She’d parked in an illegal spot on Washington Street. She walked the length of the sidewalk in nothing more than a pair

of slouchy jeans and a pullover, her hair pulled back into a loose chignon, stopping before the doors of Boars Head, hearing rock music and the smell of stale beer, filter out into the streets.

She attempted to call Brandon from her dying cell phone, but only got his voicemail. Then, she tried Scotty. No answer. She tried them both again, feeling her frustration climb, watching people walk in and out of the bar. When she received no answer, she walked into the bar, shoved past the people, saw neither Scott Kelly, nor Brandon Greene. Her frustration turned into anger.

She would ring that Brandon Greene’s neck when she saw him! She’d had enough of him! Enough of the games, dear, Lord! When she saw him, she would give him a piece of her mind.

Her cellular phone vibrated in her hand. She huffed, pulled it into view, and looked at the screen.

Brandon G. calling...

“Where on God’s green earth...?”

“Natalie, it’s Scotty...”

“I’m here, and where are you?”

“We’re around back...the line was too long in the bathroom...Brandon started throwing up...”

“We had a fight, Nat,” Brandon slurred to her on the way back to the house on Trent road. “Sophia and me, we had a huge fight.”

“That doesn’t surprise me...”

“It’s almost over, Natalie,” he continued, with a victorious laugh. “I can feel it, damn it! Goddamnit, it’s almost over, Natalie Chandler...”

“Brandon, if your language doesn’t change, I’m pulling over and letting you out, and you can walk back...”

“Don’t threaten me, girl,” he said. “You—you—you wouldn’t do that...”

“Lord, can you get it out? Your language is perfect right now, I swear...”

He looked at her, heavy-lidded and wide-grinned. “You’re better than her...”

“I didn’t know that there was a need to compare...”

“She’s perfect,” he said. “But you’re better...”

“She’s your girlfriend,” she sighed. “No one should be better than your girlfriend...”

“She’s a bitch...” Though frustrated, Natalie couldn’t help but chuckle quietly at the emphasis he put on the word *bitch*.

“Brandon Greene, I swear...”

“She doesn’t think that I should go to grad school here...”

“That’s your decision, isn’t it?” Natalie asked, looking over at him for the first time. “Last time I checked, you didn’t have a ring on your finger...”

“Exactly! U—U—UGA has an awesome business school...I could go for marketing, get my masters and get a great job...”

“That’s a decision you need to make soon, right?”

He nodded. “Exactly. I could keep paying rent on the house and just go to school here. My folks are okay with it, why she isn’t, I’ll never understand...”

“Well, where does she want you to go to school?”

“That’s just the thing, Natalie Chandler,” he sang funnily. “She doesn’t want me to go to grad school at all...”

“It’s your decision, Brandon...”

“Tell me what I should do, Natalie,” he whispered. “If you tell me to go, then I’ll go...”

“Brandon, I can’t make a decision like that for you,” she told him.

“Yes you can,” he said. “I trust all of your decisions...if you tell me that grad school is right for me, then grad school I’ll go...”

“Brandon, you’re drunk,” she sighed, gripping her wheel tightly. “You shouldn’t make such drastic decisions when you’re like this.”

“What?” he said. “I’m fine, damn it...I could go another round...”

“Well, throwing up like that suggests that you can’t...”

“I can hold my liquor, girl,” he laughed haughtily. “When you drink then you’ll know...”

“I don’t think that day will ever come...”

“Yes, it will,” he told her, poking her arm. “And I’ll get you there...we can get drunk together...”

“I think you should cool it for a little while...”

“Nat, if it weren’t for my drunkenness, we would have never met...”

“And just think of how perfect my life would have been...”

“I don’t take your sarcasm personally,” he said, reclining in his seat. “I take it in stride. Meeting me was the best thing that ever happened to you...”

“That’s arguable...”

“Decision time, Natalie...grad school or no?”

“Brandon, I’m not making that decision for you.”

“I give you permission...”

“And I don’t take it,” she said. “If you and Sophia have a future together then you need to tell her what you want...and if she loves you, then she’ll agree...”

“Fuck that,” he said with a wave of his hand. “You’re making the decision...”

“Fine, fine,” she sighed. “You probably won’t remember this in the morning anyway...go to grad school here, Brandon...”

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “Besides, if I left...I’m almost certain that you’d miss me...”

Natalie Chandler was a natural caretaker. She could easily recall all of the times that she was there for her sisters when they got sick, or when they got stuck, when she was there for her grandmother, her mama, her aunts, her cousins.

So it was no surprise that Brandon ended up sleeping on his own hardwood floor, while she fell asleep in his bed. She found herself rolling over every once in awhile just to check on him. This moment followed a couple of hours in his black-tiled bathroom, slouched on the cold floor. She caressed the back of

her Caucasian friend while she heard him retch, emptying the contents of his poisoned stomach into the toilet. She then glanced up at a small-framed picture of him and Sophia on the top of the toilet.

Where was she? Why wasn’t his beloved Sophia on the floor with him? What sort of purpose did she serve if she wasn’t there for him? The smell was almost unbearable, but she loved being there for him then.

“I’m sorry, Nat,” he muttered into her neck as he rested his groggy head on her shoulder once he’d finished.

“Shhh,” she’d instructed, smoothing down his messy black hair. “It’s alright, you silly thing...”

Natalie wrapped her arms around him tightly, rubbing his forehead till he passed out to soft snores.

Yes, she’d sat right there with him on the cold tile floor, her, barefoot, him, sloppily dressed, his weight, too heavy for her to move initially.

Yes, his drinking problem was beginning to scare her, following a year’s worth of solid evidence and observations, following a year’s worth of late night drunken phone calls, telling her about how cool he thought she was, about how funny he thought she was, about how cool it was that one of his closest friends was a black girl.

Yes, Brandon’s instability brought her to him, provided her with a year’s worth of closeness, provided her with enough room to give a rat’s behind about him, though she was afraid to tell him that she feared his problems were getting worse.

Natalie couldn't believe how close she'd held him there on that bathroom floor, couldn't believe how comfortable she was just sitting there with him, at three in the morning.

...

In her sophomore year, her workload became almost too much to bear, and she spent the majority of her time in the library, alongside Asha Castile, whom she'd grown ridiculously close to in a short amount of time. She'd found her, miraculously, in the student union one night, late in her freshman year, reading the same chemistry book as she. What followed was a remarkable discovery that they had been in the same class all semester and did not know it. They connected on the pure irony that the only two black girls in the entire class would not recognize nor acknowledge each other. Sharing the same major, the same skin complexion and the same cultural background gave the two girls an ample amount to talk about.

Asha was louder, far more outgoing, wore her neat tight dark brown coils in constant up-dos, with her flashy earrings occupying her small caramel ears, and with her humor, her knack for the social and her need for constant peer communication, Asha was part of every black organization on campus. That meant that in the beginning part of their sophomore year together, her cellular phone was constantly ringing, and in the most random places, Asha's natural magnetism attracted the hellos of random passersby.

Asha Castile was a true bayou baby, hailing from the verdant swamps of Louisiana. Her dialect was low, rich, thick, sev-

eral years more mature than her status as a teenager would suggest. On occasion, Natalie found herself looking at her friend, wondering how Asha retained the capability to tolerate her contrasting daintiness, her quietness, her religious reservations.

"I hate this bullshit," Asha grumbled, throwing down her chemistry book. "Electrons, protons...fuck this!"

They had midterms coming up. And although Natalie had felt more confident that she'd do well, Asha could self-combust at any moment at the thought of it.

"It's alright," Natalie chuckled, tapping her friend on the shoulder. "It shouldn't be that hard."

"Please, Nat," Asha said. "Of course it won't be hard for you. You're a damn genius. Do you know how many guys want to get with you?"

"Please don't bring that up now." Natalie rolled her eyes.

"Oh, I will, because I'm sick of studying this shit, and I'm ready to talk about what you're not ready to talk about."

"We're not talking about it. Don't even say his name..."

"Andre," Asha teased. "Andre Thomas."

"Stop it..." Then Natalie's phone rang.

Natalie was relieved. Ever since the night outside of the student union that short, crooked-toothed, yet unbelievably sweet Andre approached her, innocently admitting that he'd liked her since the beginning of freshman year, Asha hadn't been able to let it go, finding it quite and endlessly funny.

Although Natalie didn't find Andre attractive at all, she also didn't find much time to think about other boys either. At least, not in the same way that she watched Asha and her other

girlfriends talk about them. To Natalie, boys were a waste of time, and space, and held her back from achieving her goal.

Brandon G. calling...

Except for that one...

She sometimes regretted giving him her phone number that night, drinking chamomile tea, because he seemed to call her for all the wrong reasons. Though their friendship had started unbelievably strong, it seemed that their entire camaraderie was based off of his uneven and incredibly strange relationship with Sophia Baldwin. Brandon Greene would call and Natalie would listen patiently, she would listen to all of the bad things that Sophia said, or how she flirted with the frat boys from Theta Beta, or how high maintenance she was. Despite her growing affection for her friend, she feared that the topic of "Sophia" was increasingly growing out of control and too much for her to handle.

"Yes?" She'd answered with a sigh.

"Let's go eat somewhere," Brandon Greene demanded.

"I can't, I'm studying."

"Can't you take a break?"

"Of course, I'm taking one right now, and then I'll go right back to studying."

"You're in the library?"

"Possibly."

"I'm coming to pick you up," Brandon Greene told her in a singsong voice.

"You don't know where I am," she mocked in a higher singsong voice.

"I can find you."

"That's creepy..."

"There's this new restaurant that I want to try," he told her.

"I don't have any money, Brandon."

"I'll pay for you...you know that."

Natalie sighed. "I don't want to hear about Sophia all night. I'd rather claw my eyes out."

"Don't worry about that, Nat. We broke up..."

They went to the Sushi Bar on East Clayton Street that clear, chilly night in mid-October. Just a week prior they'd celebrated her nineteenth birthday in which he'd taken her out for burgers and then to a play at the Holden Theatre in the park about a German and a Jew attempting to be together during World War Two. They'd spent the entire car ride back that night arguing about why their differences shouldn't have mattered and why they consequently did.

He sat her down first; he sat across from her, authentic Japanese music hailed in the background.

Over six California rolls set before her, she remained silent, stared at him from time to time, took note of the fact that he showed no indication of heart brokenness, something which she expected of someone who'd just broken up with the person that they'd spent a considerable amount of time with. The only evidence was in his appearance, which was slightly dishev-

eled, hair slightly matted. He didn't say much, only picked at his sashimi, and looked up at her on occasion, smiling cheekily.

"You don't want to talk about it?"

He looked at her. "Talk about what?"

"About...you know...her..."

"Her?"

"Brandon, don't play."

He cleared his throat. "You didn't want to hear about her."

"I didn't want to hear about your problems with her...I certainly want to hear about how y'all broke up."

He took another long, drawn out bite. "I broke up with her..."

"You mean, Brandon David Greene actually grew some balls and told her it was over?"

"It's not funny."

"I'm not laughing. I'm being serious."

"Hardest decision of my life."

"I'll bet."

"When you get your first boyfriend, Natalie, then you'll understand."

"I've dated," she defended, shoving a whole roll into her mouth.

"Your chemistry textbook doesn't count."

"I've had a boyfriend before."

"When?"

"High school."

"High school, really? I believe it's time to live in the now. You need to start dating."

"I'll date when I feel like it."

"And when will that be? And please don't say, when you meet the right guy. Blah, blah, blah..."

"It's true. Certainly, there are no boneheads worth talking about here."

"Have you met any guys outside of the library?"

"Yes..."

"And not through Asha?"

Natalie paused. "No..."

"Exactly."

"Well how I meet guys doesn't matter, Brandon," Natalie assured him. "It's the fact that I meet them that matters."

"If you say so...I would just like to see you get your nose out of a textbook every once in awhile."

"That's none of your concern."

"Of course it is, Nat," Brandon said, tapping her hand once. "What else is a best friend supposed to do but worry about how their right hand is conducting their life?"

She studied his face, wanted to catch the moment where she was sure that he was joking.

But he never flinched.

They left the restaurant, he drove her back to campus, and instead of immediately hopping out of the car, she sat back into her seat, turned to him slowly and said, "You're better off without her."

Telling him this surprised her, as if she'd molded tightly into her role of "listener". She couldn't recall the last time that she actually gave him solid advice or showed that she cared at all. Brandon only assumed that she did, kept telling her his romantic and relational anecdotes, as Natalie stared back in silent absorption.

He looked confused, in the shadowed light of the dark interior, and replied, "Better off without who?"

"Brandon..."

Suddenly, clarity came to his face. "Oh! Her..."

"Yes..."

"Well, we'll see about that, now won't we?"

She nodded.

"And I think you should date him," he told her, and a smile formed slowly on his face.

"Who?"

"Andre Thomas," he sang.

"And on that note...I'm leaving...goodbye Brandon."

"Oh, come on, Nat," he called after her in a teasing tone.

"I'm just joking with you! I ran into Asha on campus...she had to tell me about it...since you didn't tell me about it."

She'd shut the door, and he rolled down the window to speak to her. "With good reason!" she said.

"Alright then," Brandon said. "I approve..."

Natalie scoffed and rolled her eyes, placing her hands on the door. "Please, Brandon..."

"Look, I know that that's what you were after! My approval...and although I've never met the guy, I approve. I'm

sure if you like him and Asha likes him...then he's got to be an alright kind of guy."

"I don't like him! He just helps me with my biology...nothing more."

"Is that what you science geeks call it these days, Nat? 'Helping with biology?'" Brandon began to laugh a hearty laugh at her, and in the process he didn't see her begin to walk away.

"I will be calling you soon, Natalie Chandler! This discussion is not over!"

"As far as I'm concerned, Brandon Greene, it is!"

...

When the winter winds blew, and the leaves fell daintily from the trees, Brandon Greene and Natalie Chandler found themselves inseparable, the type of connection that beckoned no explanation or no reasoning behind their gravity towards each other, only, in the simplest form, that she enjoyed his company and that he, as much as his eyes would reveal, enjoyed the idea that being around her brought him solace.

He'd come over the night following the first day of exams, somewhere close to eleven at night, and her roommate, had gone to see her boyfriend, and would probably stay the night. She'd been studying all evening for her organic exam that following morning, and he'd called her, asking her to help him with his equations again, and she'd agreed to it if he came over and kept her company while she studied. She'd let him

into her suite, him, wearing nothing more than a bulldogs pullover and a pair of black sweatpants, and black messy hair to top it all off, and he'd sat down comfortably on the round blue rug, atop the bumpy tile floor, placing a stack of Accountancy books before him.

She sat down across from him, pulling the granola bar that she'd been nibbling on down from her desk.

"You call that food?" he asked her, opening a book, looking at her with an arched eyebrow.

Natalie took a bite in his face and shrugged her shoulders. "It does the trick."

"So that explains why you're a toothpick..."

"I think my mother would beg to differ..."

"Well, since I've never met your mother, all I can say is, you could use a steak or something..."

"You want my help or not?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," he told her. "I'm just doing my job..."

"Great," she said. "Now let me do mine...how much did you study?"

"Not much..."

"Bran..."

"Well, between this and Christmas shopping and FBLA meetings and all the holiday festivities, this kind of got put on the back-burner..."

"So, you dump it all on me?"

"Not necessarily...I have all of the problems written down..."

"I swear you're a handful sometimes..."

"But, you love me through and through..."

"That's arguable right now..."

She snatched the book he'd been flipping through from him and instructed him to pull out a scrap sheet of paper and a pencil.

Natalie amazed herself. How she knew these equations, she would never know. But they seemed so easy to her. The numbers simply fit into her head perfectly once Brandon showed her the steps he was taught in class. The pencil in her hand moved wildly on the paper as she instructed him on what needed to be added, what needed to be subtracted, what needed to be plugged into the calculator, what needed to be carried where.

"Why don't we switch majors?" Brandon asked her. "How in the hell did I get into grad school?"

"You're smart," Natalie assured him, patting him on the knee. "You just get caught up in the formula and you don't plug it in correctly...you do it like I just showed you and I'll guarantee you that you'll make a good grade..."

"God, you're so smart," he said. "When did you get to be so smart...?"

"It's not a function of being smart," she explained. "I just look at numbers a little differently than you do..."

"My professor's an asshole, and he grades terribly...we'll see if I make a good grade or not..."

She reached up to him, pushed a few strands of his hair out of his eyes softly and smiled into his face. "You'll do fi-

ne...and if you don't, rest assured I'll have a thing or two to say to your professor..."

"Would you really?"

"Yes, I'd tell him, 'Sir, Mister, whatever, if you don't give Brandon Greene a good grade I'll knock you in the head'..."

"Very threatening, Nat, really...and please make sure you use that sweet southern belle accent too...that's really intimidating..."

"Fine, I won't say anything..."

He reached out to her playfully, and she attempted to push his hands away, all the while failing to realize that her cheeks had now grown hot.

"Brandon, stop it..."

"No, really, it's cute, you should do it just like that...I'm sure he'll melt, really..."

"Or, I can do this..."

It was then that she lifted her barefoot up, stuck it in his face, feeling him reach up and knock it out, calling out, "Nat, quit it," grabbing her ankle, attempting to hold it off that way. But she persisted, got instant pleasure out of watching Brandon squirm, watching his face wince in disgust. He caught hold to her ankle swiftly, lowering her leg forcefully.

"When's the last time you washed those things? They smelled..."

"They did not..."

"I didn't know you could be so disgusting, Natalie Chandler..."

"Only when pressed to be..."

"Now, would you like it if I did that to you?"

"No, no," she told him, chuckling a little. "Because yours really do smell..."

"Exactly," he laughed. "And you wouldn't be laughing then, would you?"

"No, because I'd be too busy kicking your behind..."

"You have the most incredible accent, I swear," he laughed.

"I do not..."

"I do not," he mocked. "Where on earth do you come from?"

She knocked him over with one push of her two hands into his chest, knocking his back onto the floor. He chuckled, pulling her down with him.

And he held her there with him, just for a second, just long enough to make her heart start beating strangely, just long enough to where she could smell him...some kind of soapy, laundry detergent scent.

Their new thing to do together when they were bored was wrestle. Initially, Natalie fell victim to Brandon's brute strength and height advantage, but, one rainy night in early November, Natalie discovered his weakness; he was ticklish in a nook just below his armpit. Natalie started winning every "match" thereafter.

And she freed herself from his grasp, pushing him down again before he sat up all the way, hearing him groan and laugh at the same time as he went down. "Damn it, Nat...I wish you would let me study...you're always distracting me..."

“So that explains why you’re always asking me to do your homework...”

“Yes, among other reasons,” he grinned. “Maybe I should leave...that way I’ll get some studying done...”

She’d stood up at her desk, messing with her stereo, attempting to pick a CD to listen to. She’d turned to him, checking his face to see if he was serious, and said, “No...don’t leave...I’ll behave...”

“Good, good,” he said, opening another book. “I wasn’t going to leave...I just have to read this chapter and we can have all of the fun that you want...I could be an accountant someday, you know...”

“I don’t see that for you...”

“Oh?”

“No,” she told him, as Jill Scott sang “You’re gettin’ in the way of what I’m feelin’...” from her stereo. “I see you doing something else...something more creative...accountants are bald and boring...”

“And what do you see me doing, Natalie Chandler?”

“Marketing, or Advertising...where you have to come up with those cute little storyboards...”

“You really see that for me?”

“Yes, silly thing,” she told him, returning to her spot on the floor. “I always have...you’re far more creative than you give yourself credit for...”

“I’d say the same about you, Nat...”

“Please,” she began, waving her hand in front of his face. “I help you with a few equations and you think that’s something special...”

“No, dumb ass,” he began. “The part about what you give yourself credit for...”

“It isn’t necessary sometimes,” she told him with a shrug of her shoulders. “I just do what I have to do...”

“And you’re very good at what you do...”

She looked at him. Something eased her about the fact that he seemed to have her figured out. Something pleased her about that as well...

Brandon curled his long body up into a remarkably tight ball on the floor, placed the textbook before his eyes, furrowed his brows and fell silent.

She climbed atop her unmade bed, reached for her own book, rested it on her knees, and started to read the chapter that was assigned to her on the study guide. She knew that she had to do well on this test if she had any shot at making a decent grade in the class, but for reasons unknown to her, Brandon Greene’s lounging position on the floor captured her attention far more easily than any equation in her book.

She watched him easily flip a page, knowing that he was a fast reader, and randomly wondered if he still thought about Sophia. She then wondered why she cared at all, because for the past couple of months, their friendship was less one-sided, and Brandon was far more of a pleasure to be around, far easier to talk to, and seemed to care more about how she was carrying on her life far more than he used to. So, maybe she

shouldn't wonder or worry about it. She should savor these moments that she had Brandon here, and appreciate the fact that there was someone there that would listen to her, that was beginning to understand her.

Perhaps a lot better than she understood herself...

She didn't realize that she'd fallen asleep on top of her book until Brandon shook her gently, saying, "We should go eat..."

"Eat? What time is it?"

"Three..."

"As in three in the morning?"

"Yes, genius," he said, rolling his eyes. "And I want pizza..."

"My exam is in five hours..."

"Nat, you fell asleep on top of your book," he told her, reaching for her arms in an attempt to pull her up. "I think you deserve a break..."

He sat her up, pushed her hair out of her face, and she wiped her eyes.

"Did you finish your chapter?"

"Yes," he chuckled. "A couple of hours ago..."

"Well, what in the world have you been doing?"

"Watching you sleep," he admitted, with a sneaky grin.

"And you snore..."

They got into his truck, parked in a lot down the sidewalk from the dorm. They went to Mario's on Lafayette on the other side of downtown, one of the very few places that was

still open at that late hour. And Brandon bought both of them a slice of cheese and sausage each, and they returned to the dorm shortly after, consuming their food on the floor of her room together.

And by five-thirty, tossing her book to the floor angrily, Natalie Chandler climbed into her bed, and tossed her Caucasian companion, who'd stretched out on her floor an extra blanket from her bed, and a polka-dotted throw pillow, given to her as a high school graduation present over a year ago.

"It would be great if you didn't snore," Brandon said, adjusting himself on the floor.

Natalie pulled the covers up to her cheek, rolled her eyes, and got settled in. "It would be great if you went back to your own house...there's a bed there, you know..."

"Yea, yea," he mumbled. "And then you'd have a freak attack, because I left you. You can admit it now, you like me being here..."

"I plead the fifth..."

"I love you too," he told her. "Did you set your alarm?"

"Yes, mother..."

"Goodnight, Natalie..."

"Goodnight, Brandon..."

...

By springtime, when the trees swayed under speckled sunlight to a lazy, natural rhythm, Brandon found Sophia again.

He called Natalie one night as she sat with Asha in the library. She had to whisper, but wanted to yell, wanted to reach through the phone and kill that Brandon Greene!

“Brandon, are you crazy?” she forced through tight lips.

“Yes, Natalie, I’m crazy,” he told her plainly. “I don’t know what happened. She came to my house, told me she loved me and that was it...I was a goner!”

“I repeat...Brandon David Greene...are you crazy?”

“Nat, don’t be upset...”

“Upset? I’m not upset. I’m furious! And I’m going to kill you!”

“Don’t be overdramatic...”

“Fine...I won’t...but please don’t come running to me, when she starts running off at the mouth about trivial things. Or, when you start getting into fights about trivial things...”

“I won’t, don’t worry...”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

“Fine...”

“Are you done?” she asked him.

A period of silence followed.

“Yes...quite...” he answered a few seconds later.

She didn’t say goodbye, only chose to hang up the phone, slowly, glance at Asha and roll her eyes.

Her friend closed her textbook quickly, sighed and asked, “What has that boy done now?”

Natalie shrugged her shoulders, rolled her eyes once more, pictured that Greene boy in her mind and said, “What else would he do that would make me want to murder him?”

“Sophia...” Asha sighed with the slow shake of her head.

“Exactly. Sophia...”

“What is it with this white girl? She must give a great blow-job...”

“Asha!”

“What? I can’t be honest?”

“A little too honest...”

“I’m just saying, Nat...there must be something about that girl that keeps him running back...”

“I just—I just wish he would open his eyes and realize that Sophia isn’t the one for him...”

Asha nodded slowly, lowered her eyes as if to contemplate a thought, and said, “Yes, yes and that you are...”

“What? No...no...no...no...uh...no...”

Asha laughed. “Natalie Chandler!”

“What?”

“You like him! Your black ass likes him!”

Natalie shook her head vigorously as if she’d never processed such a thought in her mind.

“Again...no...no...no, Asha...no!”

She had to laugh...had to laugh off the audacity of it all.

“You do...you like that white boy! I saw it from miles away! I did! All the girls saw it...miles away!”

“Can I not care about my friend?”

“Oh, but of course you can, Natalie...but you not only care for him...you want him...and now that your opportunity is gone, you can only kick yourself...you like him!”

“You’re wrong...I can only kick you...you’re crazy...”

“Ha, you’re crazy, Natalie, crazy for him...”

Natalie scoffed...scoffed again...laughed nervously...yes, she had absolutely nothing to say.

“I mean...go ahead, girl...go for it...he is a good-looking little white boy, isn’t he? Well, he’s certainly not little...but...you get the point, surely...”

“I’m not going for anything...Brandon and I [She pictured Brandon, his long body extended on her dorm room floor, a book in his hands, a Georgia hoodie hugging him...her, loving the fact that her friend is there...Brandon Greene, her best friend]...Brandon and I...are just...friends...yes, friends...”

She had to admit that, somewhere in the course of her college career (thus far), somewhere in between the time that the leaves fell to the time the flowers and the trees bloomed, somewhere between midterms and pop quizzes and block parties, dinners in the cafeteria, all-nighters in the library, sporting events, she had grown to love Brandon. How did this happen?

It was warm at the end of the week when she heard from Brandon again. He showed up at her dorm door unexpectedly, was silent when she opened the door and spotted him there. She reached for her jacket, shut the door behind her and followed him to the parking lot, where the green Explorer waited patiently. They climbed in together, silent still, and in short

time they were walking down the sidewalk downtown, the breeze cool, her arm locked with his.

“I want you to understand why I did it,” he began as they walked slowly, their strides in sync. “I know I’ve complained and complained about her so many times, I...I think I know what I’m doing, Natalie...”

Natalie glanced up toward the night sky, saw its clarity, sighed.

“Bran, when it’s all said and done, I just want you to be happy,” she told him calmly. “And in that same respect, you are an adult...and you can do just about whatever you want...my opinion of your choices shouldn’t matter...”

“But it does,” he told her. “It always does. Who else can I talk to about this, but you?”

Natalie shrugged her shoulders.

“I love her, Nat,” he said quietly. “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“I’ve always been taught that if it’s the kind of love that completes you, changes you for the better in some kind of way, then it’s the right kind of love...if Sophia is that girl...then...”

Brandon only nodded. She had not yet grasped enough of him to read him. She only hoped, for his sake, of course, that Sophia was that girl who ever the girl may be...

In the following weeks, she saw very little of her friend, rarely heard from him, with the exception of an occasional phone call, the primary subject of which, of course, was how amazing his relationship with Sophia was.

“How is she?” Natalie asked him. She secretly hoped that he’d say that she was terrible, that the sex was terrible, that he’d made his final mistake with her.

“She’s great,” he’d told her with a pleased sigh. “Things have returned to some stint of normalcy...it’s almost as if she’s a new person...”

“Oh...”

“How are you, Nat?”

“I’m fine...”

“Fine?”

“Yes, Brandon, fine...”

“That’s good to hear...well, I have to run...we’re going out to dinner...call you later...”

“Bye...”

...

It was in this time that she got the chance to reconnect with Asha, and took a small time to expand her social circle, if only by a little, just enough to the point where she felt socially comfortable. This included joining the chemistry club, where, with her knack for organic chemistry, she was appointed vice president. This also included going to the occasional party or two, a venture that Brandon had previously said not to take without him. This included the occasional club trip with Asha, the block parties, the cookouts, a road trip or two into Atlanta...anything that could convince herself that her college career didn’t surround Brandon Greene...

Then, Brandon called one night, over a month following the separation, wanting to go out with her.

“A movie,” he’d said. “Just someplace quiet.”

He showed up outside of her dorm building, and when she slid into the passenger seat beside him, she took notice of his appearance. He certainly didn’t look the same, certainly had a darker shadow about him, allowed his hair to grow out longer than what looked right on him.

“Hi,” she said cautiously looking at him.

“Hello,” he replied, clearing his throat, shifting his hand brake to drive.

“Long time, no see,” she said, hoping that it didn’t come out sarcastically, hoping that he didn’t go into a long rant about the status of his relationship with Sophia.

He nodded. “Yep...”

The twenty-minute ride was silent between them, save for his music that played on the radio. Brandon Greene kept his eyes focused on the road, tapped his hands on the wheel in a frustrated motion.

Please God, she thought, please don’t let him say anything...

When she saw Brandon pass the movie theatre, she looked in his direction, and said, “Um, Brandon...did you forget where it was?”

“Nope...”

“Where are we going?”

“Don’t worry about it...”

“I would like to know where we’re going,” she said. “This is kidnap, you know...”

“Natalie, grow up, will you? Could you do that for me?”

“What on earth is your problem?”

He didn’t answer, he only drove, and she watched the lights pass in a fleeting blur, felt the air from the cracked windows, saw her friend in some fixed state, only sighed, flopped back in her seat, and Brandon accelerated more.

“Brandon...” she said in low voice after moments had passed. He didn’t answer.

“Brandon...” she called again. “Would you like to tell me what’s wrong?”

She hated asking, just as much as she hated the fact that she didn’t know where they were going, as if she wasn’t yet adjusted to the “unknown” with Brandon Greene.

“Now is not the time for Annoying Natalie...”

She’d had enough!

“Brandon...pull—“

“Natalie, if you say my name one more time...”

“Brandon...pull the car over...”

“Natalie...”

“Brandon...the car! Pull it over...”

And he did. He found a side road, a tree-lined avenue with brick ranch houses.

She climbed out of the car, he followed suit, and they stood before each other in front of the car. The lights were still on.

With her arms folded, she looked at him, couldn’t believe that she was tapping her foot like her mother, didn’t know why she got so mad at him, didn’t know why, in the silence of that residential street and the way his eyes enlarged in her direction, she felt her stomach do something weird.

“What’s your problem?” she asked again. “I haven’t seen you in a month, then you give me this attitude? I don’t know where you come from, Brandon Greene, but that’s not how you treat friends...”

“She’s been sleeping with someone behind my back!”

“What?”

“Sophia...she...she’s been sleeping with someone behind my back...”

“Who?”

“I don’t know...”

“Well, how do you know that she’s been sleeping around?”

“Scotty told me...”

“Well you cheated on her,” she reminded him. “Surely you didn’t think it wouldn’t come back to bite you in the butt...”

“And why are you not on my side on this?”

“It’s not about sides, Brandon...I...”

Suddenly, she felt that exhaustion return, the type that made her want to steer clear of him altogether, the kind that wanted to smack some sense into him, the kind that made her angrier that what she thought appropriate for a Christian girl, than what she thought appropriate for their situation...

And she looked at her friend, prayed to her Lord that he didn’t say another word, that he only understood, that they

were close enough to where he could see the exasperation in her eyes...

“I loved her, Nat...”

She took a deep breath...

“I mean, I really, really loved her—“

“You’re so selfish, Brandon Greene...”

He closed his lips, his eyes grew bigger, and the expression that followed suit made her stomach turn again.

“What?”

“You’re so selfish,” she repeated, tightening her folded arms. “Lord have mercy, you think the sun rises and sets on your behind, don’t you?”

“Where in the hell did that come from?”

“Observation, Brandon! Pure observation!”

She turned away from him, wanted the feeling in her stomach to go away, wanted the image of the look in his eyes to leave her mind.

“What the—“

“Leave her, Brandon! Leave her...” She felt her voice crack.

Silence again. She could hear his breaths behind her. And she turned to him again, and the weird feeling in her stomach intensified, and she studied his face, looked for the moment where she hoped he’d agree with her.

“Yes, Nat,” she wanted him to say. “Yes, Nat, I’ll go home and I’ll tell her it’s over...for you...I’ll do it for you...”

But he only looked at her, and she wished that he didn’t look at her that way...in a way that suggested to an outsider

that they were more...more than the confusing friendship that they’d held for over a year.

It was more like a gaze, really, as if he had more to say and couldn’t say it, as if he wanted her to tell him why he should leave her.

“Take me home,” she whispered.

And he did.

She got out of the car without saying a word, something that had become abnormal for even her.

She slammed the door out of protest, hoped, in their silence that he got the message, that Sophia wasn’t right for him, had never been. Brandon only needed to wake up and see it himself.

...

She agreed to cover the afternoon shift at the library for Kyle, her biochem lab partner, if he agreed to tutor her for the upcoming midterm. It was the week prior to Spring Break, and she spent most of the five-hour shift twiddling her thumbs, uncomfortably daydreaming, expecting Brandon to find her there as he’d done the first time long ago, and torment her...

She sat behind the desk at the front, was responsible for checking the students who wanted books out, and directing phone calls to their varying locations. She was relieved she was taking the extra shift, wanted to save money up so that she could move into the empty bedroom in Asha’s apartment in the fall, and take the first steps in establishing her independence, and making the burden lighter for her mama. She was

excited to move off of campus, enjoyed the fact that she would get her own room, anticipated the fun she would have with Asha and the social perks that accompanied living with her.

By the fourth hour of the shift, the line to check out books had grown considerably, and by the last person, Natalie was ready to leave.

“Natalie, you look as if you’re going to beat someone up...”

Natalie looked up, and saw Scotty.

Natalie chuckled, retrieved the books in his hands, and said, “Yes, I am so ready to leave...”

“I can tell,” Scotty smiled, his teeth, the straightest and prettiest of any boy she’d ever seen. “How have you been?”

“Tired, working, ready for a break...”

“I agree,” he said.

Natalie scanned each book and Scotty waited patiently, looking down at her hands as she worked.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you at the house,” he remarked. “I thought you’d be there more since Brandon broke up with Sophia...”

Natalie looked at him, felt her insides curl. “He did what?”

“Yea, shocked me too,” Scotty said. “I think it’s for good this time...I’ve seen a lot more of him. We go out now like we used to...”

Natalie nodded, placed the books in a neat stack, relief warmed her. “How is he?” She asked this with hesitation, as if it would give away how she was beginning to feel about him.

Scotty sighed, “He’s great...I’ve never seen him happier...he goes to see the kids again now...after awhile he stopped...I think Sophia thought the attention was being pulled away from her...”

A countenance of confusion crossed Natalie’s face. “Kids?”

“Yea, Brandon volunteers at Bledsoe Elementary across town,” Scotty informed. “He watches kids after school...been doing it since freshman year...I don’t know why he goes all the way across town, but he does...”

Natalie finished her shift, took the four o’ clock bus, and arrived at the elementary school in minutes, curiosity driving her. She entered the building, felt the cool interior chill her bare brown arms, saw the Easter artwork of the children, immediately recalled her days of elementary school, which seemed a lifetime ago, which, during its time, brought her happiness. She noticed the plainness of the walls, the bland cream-colored, institutionalized cement blocks, the chipping paint towards the ceiling, the cracked green tile floor, the sound of laughing children nearby, the smell of crayons and stale food surfacing.

She walked slowly, feeling the guilt of invasiveness cover her, wondering how she’d react once she saw him, how he would feel if he saw her.

She turned a corner, the light of early evening flashing into her eyes, and she gasped when someone tapped her lightly on the shoulder.

“Are you here to pick up a child?”

Natalie turned around to see a shorter black woman standing before her. Her soft voice matched her sweet round face and her humble appearance.

Natalie quickly shook her head.

“You must be looking for Brandon,” the woman assumed before she could speak.

Natalie nodded timidly, and the woman touched her gingerly on the arm, extending her hand outward, pointing her finger in the direction of another hallway.

“Very well,” the woman said. “It’s after four, the kids should be done with homework and should be outside...now, walk down this hallway, and turn right...the door to the playground should be there...I don’t know what Brandon has planned for the kids today, but they should be nearby...”

She spotted his lofty frame, standing in a small space of patchy grass to the right of the worn-down playground. She removed her sandals, placed them neatly on the concrete foundation by the door, and began her tread on the grass, remarkably soft, the tall fully green trees, creating a fence to the outside world, the sound of cars on the busy two-lane road beyond the trees, whirring by. The breeze was soft, and the branches of the trees rustled, and several feet ahead of her, she heard the laughter and the squeals of the eight or so children, mostly girls, either black or Hispanic, being chased by the big, bad Brandon.

They called him “Brandy”, and his hearty laugh became louder as she got closer. He lifted some of the children up into

his arms, and some pretended that they were flying, squealing all the way through, and the image of Brandon’s smile, made her heart beat funny, the sight of the way his hair naturally fell into his face made it hard for her to breathe...

Natalie, what on earth is going on?

And it was then, when he stopped his horseplay and spotted her, a look of bewilderment crossing his face, the breeze growing stronger, the sunlight illuminating his eyes, that she internally admitted to having feelings for Brandon.

He said nothing, of course, and turned back to his children, and she noticed that a couple of the girls were gazing at him, the way she and Maya gazed at hazel-eyed, brown-skinned Mr. Paltrow in the fourth grade.

“Why don’t we play a nice game of freeze tag?” Brandon told them, a couple of dark-skinned girls with matching knobby knees, latching onto his legs.

The children squealed in excitement and began the argument of who should be “it”.

It was then that Brandon looked at Natalie, smiling. “And don’t you think my friend, Nattie, should come play too?”

Suddenly, she liked the way he called her that...

Oh, no, Natalie, no.

The children cheered, but Natalie took a step back. She didn’t want to play, had never gotten accustomed to playing games with children. She realized then, and regretted somewhat, that while Sid and Maya preferred running outside in the yard like a couple of banshees, getting their play clothes dirty, Natalie was inside, under her mama’s wing, learning the

ends and outs of cooking food, enjoying the fact that she got to stay clean and not get reprimanded for coming in the house dirty.

Natalie shook her head in Brandon's direction, becoming uneasy as he approached her.

"No, Brandon, no," she whined to him as he took her arm. "I can't...I'm barefoot..."

"A lousy excuse," he told her. "Come on, the kids want you to play...and don't disappoint the kids..."

He tugged on her arm, pulling her into the direction of the children who now stood in a group. The same two girls then latched onto Brandon's leg again, pleading, "Brandy, we want you to play too! Come play!"

Brandon, laughing a little, sighed and said, "Alright, you little munchkins, only if I'll be 'it'..."

The children enjoyed this idea, as if they knew that Brandon, being as tall as he was, would be the ultimate challenge to run away from.

Natalie was able to pull Brandon aside for a moment, and whisper closely, "Bran, I don't know how to play tag..."

He looked at her, and the way his eyes moved, caused Natalie to stop breathing for a split second, and the strange feelings returned. "Run," he whispered back. "Just run as fast as you can..."

The children, and Natalie, were able to get a good head start. They frantically began to run about the small grassy area, and Brandon stood frozen for a few moments, smiling, watching them squeal with delight. A pair of girls took hold of

Natalie's wrists, saying, "This way, this way! He won't get you over here..."

And Natalie followed, her innocence and reservations prevailing, feeling Brandon's eyes watching her every move, allowing herself to smile if only temporarily. Some children hid behind the bases of large fencing oak trees, snickering quietly, witnessing their "Brandy" begin to take his first steps. The two girls ushered Natalie to one of these trees, ordering her to stand behind it, while they stood behind her, clutching onto her slim legs as they had done with Brandon before.

Natalie didn't understand why her heart started to beat wildly, feeling as much alive as the children below her, feeling the excitement, the anticipation and a tinge of fear, taking into consideration Brandon's masterful body structure and his apt for the athletics coming into play. She felt the sweat of the warm early Spring day bead at her forehead, felt her body warm to the idea of being chased by Brandy, liking the nickname more and more as time passed. She poked her head around the wide base of the tree, saw Brandon begin his attack on the children, catching a couple with one expanse of his long, muscular arm, grabbing them momentarily, growling hungrily, almost scarily, making them freeze in their spot. The children let out a loud squeal of defeat, and Natalie returned her head to her hiding place, butterflies fluttering in her stomach, the two girls latching on for dear life, the sound of Brandon's footsteps getting closer and closer. Natalie smiled for a moment, heard her two little companions say that Brandy was

always this fun, hoping that this time they wouldn't get caught...they would stick together...

The children ran frantically, Brandon close behind them, scooping them up into his arms, sighing each time that a child was able to become unfrozen and he had to go after them again. Natalie could hear his breaths of exhaustion, could hear it in his laughter, breathed deeper each time that she heard a joke he told to one child, or the way he laughed with another...

Suddenly, she could no longer hear his laughter, could no longer hear him at all, and her two girls clutched tighter to her legs, Natalie's heart a complete mess by now, her breaths in the same fashion...

The silence, save for the sound of the rustling trees, gave her the feeling of excitement and danger, something she never felt as a child, something she avoided feeling, because the thirst for safety always prevailed.

"Take my hands, girls," she told them in whisper. "And get ready..."

When she heard the sound of a twig snap on the other side of the tree base, she took off running, her two little ones in tow, laughing by way of screaming, Brandon, breaking free from his hiding place, running as if he were in a marathon, and Natalie too afraid to look back, only imagining the vision of Brandon's tall, muscular frame running after her, a look of hunger on his face, and defeating a challenge wrapped up in his eyes...

She hollered at the thought of it, laughing through and through, holding tight to her girls' hands, swinging them around the bases of trees, the dappled sunlight spilling through the branches on them, Brandon at their heels, growling, "You can't protect her forever, Tiffany and Emilia! Nattie will be mine soon!"

"No!" her two girls shrieked with ardency.

And they kept on. Natalie surely surprised herself at how fast she ran, surprised at the fact that she was actually outrunning her best friend, actually getting the best of him at something.

But soon, Brandon grabbed hold of her two little ones, saying, "Gotcha!"

They froze in their spots, yelling, "Run, Nattie, run! Brandy's going to get you!"

Not if she had anything to do with it. He chased her around the trees, and into the open field, Natalie shrieking through and through, her excitement boiling inside, her hair in her face, the sight of Brandon's hungry face behind her, causing her entrails to twist.

"No, Brandon, no!"

"Yes!" he said. "You can't run all day...I'll get you..."

The children, in their frozen positions, cheered for their new friend, eagerly hoping that Natalie would be the one to break Brandon's flawless tagging record.

Brandon lunged out at her, but missed, making an indecipherable noise of defeat, and ran a little harder, his athletic

skills impressing her, her loving being near him then...that Brandon Greene...

And when he finally caught her, he wrapped his arms around her body, holding her close, his arms grasping at her waist as she tried to break free, his face close to her own, the smell of his warmed body near her, the breeze cooling the heat between their connected extremities.

And he held her longer than what was necessary for the game, held her just enough to the point that she sensed those feelings intensifying, held onto his arms, pressing her fingers into his skin, felt his breath on her neck, couldn't believe that this was the moment that she'd dreaded for weeks, that this was the moment that she knew her feelings had changed...

Towards six o'clock, Brandon ushered his kids to the playground so that they could wait on their parents to arrive, and as they watched the children play, watched their imaginations run wild, watch the sun begin to move to the western sky and the breeze grow chilly, Natalie sat next to Brandon on the swing set, holding the handles between her two hands, looking at him in a way that she couldn't remember looking at him before...

"I can't believe I stopped doing this," he told her with a sigh, sweat at his brow.

"I can't remember the last time I had this much fun," she replied, with a smile.

"Right," he said. "And you learned to run like that from where?"

Natalie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know...good question..."

"I was impressed..."

"I was impressed...but what else would be expected from the illustrious Brandon Greene?"

Brandon rolled his eyes. "Please...illustrious, my ass...I have nothing to hide in front of you...you've humbled me, Natalie Chandler..."

She didn't answer, looked toward the playground, saw the children's happiness, couldn't remember the last time she felt so at peace...

"Why did you come?" he asked her, and she met his gaze. She shook her head. "I'm not sure why..."

He smiled. "Because you care about me..."

She, too, rolled her eyes. "Care about you, my butt...surely you don't think..."

"Natalie Chandler, you care about me! I'm flattered, really...I'm so glad you could put me before Andre Thomas...really, really glad..."

Natalie punched him playfully in the arm, smiled, and sighed, "Yes, I care for you...but not any longer if you keep making dumb mistakes..."

"No longer will you hear about my dumb mistakes...they are long gone..."

"I hope so..."

Silence followed. They both looked out toward the children, saw them playing innocently, Natalie wishing she could go back to those days, where they had nothing but their lives ahead of them...

“I was selfish,” Brandon admitted in the quietest voice that Natalie had ever heard from him. “And I’m sorry...”

Natalie lowered her head, shook it slowly and said, “No, I’m sorry...you needed me and I couldn’t deliver that night... part of me just wanted you to be done with her...completely...as you think, I ‘care about you’ and I didn’t want you to be hurting the way you were...you should have been more aware, and I should have been a better friend instead of an extremely good listener...”

Brandon chuckled. “I don’t know what was the matter with me...it was like I knew it wasn’t healthy, I knew that our relationship had died, but all I wanted was her, all I could see was her, like it was a curse...loving someone shouldn’t make you blind to the things you love...I should have been a better friend, Nat...and I wasn’t...”

They met eyes, Natalie smiled at him, extended her hand to his shoulder, smiled wider and said, “That’s why I’m here... Brandy...to give you a second chance...because...because you deserve it...”

“Brandy...I like hearing it from you,” he told her.

She wished her face didn’t heat up, wished her hands didn’t clam up, wished the breeze didn’t blow Brandon’s hair that way, wished she couldn’t smell his nearness, wished he didn’t purse his lips that way, make those faces...

If these were the makings of her feelings for him, she couldn’t welcome them, didn’t like the idea that she could feel this way about him, didn’t like the idea that she would see him differently, and it unsettled her that she felt him in her surroundings, felt him around her...it was surely unnatural...

He leaned into her, she stopped her slow swinging, and his lips grazed the top of her forehead, leading toward a slow, affectionate kiss, leaving her with only feeling, only the need to close her eyes, take it in, feel his hot breath on her skin, feel the soft touch of his lips, writhed under the idea that this small gesture, with all its newness and care attached, was the beginning of a movement to turn her world upside down...

“Jekyll Island...” Brandon mentioned randomly as they rode home together.

“What?”

“For spring break,” he said. “Do you want to go?”

“I don’t have any money, Brandon...”

“All taken care of...all you have to do is show up,” he assured her.

“You can’t pay for my everything,” she told him.

“I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t want to,” he said.

“Just us?”

“No,” he said, clicking his teeth. “That’s the thing...it’s supposed to be with a few of my friends...they got a beach house and...I want you to go...”

“So I can stay with a couple of strangers, while you go off and have fun with your friends? Count me out, I’m going home for break...”

“Nat, please, be reasonable,” Brandon said. “If I thought you’d be uncomfortable, I wouldn’t have asked you to go...”

“Brandon...”

“I have an extra bed,” he told her. “You can stay in the room with me...”

“And...when you leave me out? What then?”

“Natalie...are you crazy? I wouldn’t leave you...”

“What if you meet a girl and want to bring her back to the room...?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he assured her. “And you don’t have to worry about that, Nattie...no girls for me...you’re the only one I need...”

She punched him in the arm again, hoping he was kidding, wishing her heart didn’t fall, wishing that riding in the car with Brandon didn’t suddenly bring her delight, wished the sunlight didn’t hit his face in that special kind of way, wished even something as minute as the smell of the air from the outside didn’t excite her in his presence.

She could feel herself, in the duration of the car ride, slowly lose her cool, could feel herself, each time that Brandon made her laugh, each time that Brandon innocently ran his fingers the length of her bare arm, feel her heart tug in his direction, as if that made any sense, as if he knew, as if he could understand.

Chapter 5

YOU'RE NATALIE
& I HATE YOU



NATALIE ALLOWED HERSELF the pull of physical attraction in the first few moments following their arrival to the beach house with bright green siding, white shutters, and a large wraparound porch, with a full-bodied aging hammock facing the shoreline.

She followed Brandon up to the bedroom that they shared, with a bay window, and two matching twin-sized beds. He, who'd carried his bag and her own, set them down beside each other, and he looked at her, mimicking the way he'd looked at her the entire trip down. It was the same piercing ogle that her far more nervous than she felt she needed to be.

And she returned the gaze, finding it difficult to remember a road trip more enjoyable, more peaceful; from the way the stale warm air of early April blew in from the cracked windows, to their arguments over Brandon's music, to the way that they got lost, and he blamed it on her, to the way that the water looked as they crossed over the bridge, sun-smearing, sparkling, clear.

He chose the bed closest to the window, and jokingly remarked, "Now...how in the hell do they expect my big ass to fit in such a tiny bed?"

She laughed under her breath, and he began pulling his t-shirt over his head, as if he were setting himself free, and she shut her eyes momentarily.

Your friend...your friend, Brandon...Brandon...

"We should go to the beach," he suggested, tossing his shirt on the bed, claiming his spot. She hesitantly turned to him, tak-

ing in the sight of Brandon's bare, muscular structure. Warmth filled her body.

She nodded nervously, turned her head and attempted to fumble with her suitcase. She then wondered what bathing suit would be appropriate, knowing that Brandon had never seen her in anything less revealing than a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

With a heavy sigh, she pulled out the yellow and white two piece with the thin straps that Asha made her buy after she reluctantly agreed to accompany Brandon on the trip.

She remembered coming out of the dressing room at the boutique downtown, Asha sitting in a chair waiting, watching her eyes pop.

"Brandon will die when he sees you in this," Asha remarked, clapping her hands together. "And...if he doesn't, any boy with any sense down there would..."

When she got home, she'd said a silent prayer that he didn't...

She escaped to the bathroom a few paces down the narrow corridor of the second floor, shut the door behind her and took a deep breath. When she changed into her suit and examined her body in the mirror, she sighed, knowing that the way it fit on her slender frame would be just as Asha suggested.

Just the thing that she didn't want to happen.

She scurried back down the hallway, reentered the bedroom, and there Brandon stood with nothing on but a pair of navy trunks, that sat low on his hips.

She swallowed thickly and sucked in her breath.

"Problem, Nat?"

She shook her head, entered the room, and went right back to digging in her suitcase. She was on a mission to find the champagne-colored sarong that Asha let her borrow.

“You look nice,” he told her, reaching for a towel from his bag.

“Thank you, Brandon,” she replied, finally finding the sarong at the bottom of her bag. “I feel like a fool...”

“Well,” he began, walking toward her. “You certainly don’t look like one...”

She followed him down the stairs, and through the kitchen where two girls sat on barstools at the breakfast bar, with cups before them.

They both looked at her strangely, then looked at Brandon in the same fashion, and he planted a hand on Natalie’s back.

“Where are you off to, Brandon?” a redheaded girl asked, leaning up a little.

“To the beach,” he replied, moving his fingers against her skin a little bit.

“And this must be the Natalie you mentioned earlier,” the other one, a brunette said.

“Right,” he said, clearing his throat. “Nat, this is Sabrina [he pointed to the redhead] and that’s Monica [pointed to the brunette who now sipped from her cup, then smiled artificially]...guys, this is my friend, Natalie...”

“Heard a lot about you, Natalie,” Sabrina told her. “Funny, a lot more than we ever heard about Sophia...isn’t that right, Mon?”

“Sure,” Monica replied looking at her friend. “A lot more...never heard about Sophia...why is that, Brandon?”

He cleared his throat and proceeded to push Natalie slightly. “Come on, Natalie...”

When they were outside, he instinctively reached for her hand, tugging at her a little bit, and she writhed under the feeling. The sand was slightly difficult to walk on, but Brandon squeezed her hand tighter each time that she stumbled on the white grain as though to steady her. She heard the sound the of sea before them, saw the sun kiss each wave, the browning sea oats swaying. The silence between them was becoming something that she enjoyed, something that she needed.

He led her to the water’s edge, the initial chill on her toes exciting her, and she temporarily forgot her fear of water.

“We should run in together,” Brandon suggested, looking down at her with a smile. He dropped her hand, turned to face her, and moved his hands toward her waist, grasping at her sarong. “Here...you should take this off first...”

“Brandon...wait...I don’t know about this...”

“What? This old thing? You do want to get in the water, don’t you?”

“Hadn’t really thought about it...”

“You mean to tell me that you can’t swim?”

“I don’t do water...”

“Who doesn’t do water? You need it to live...”

She backed away slightly. "I'm afraid..."

"Of water? Are you serious?"

She didn't answer. She only stared at him.

He sighed, reached for her hand again and said, "Why don't we take it slow? One step at a time? I assure you, it's not as bad as it may seem..."

She glanced out toward the water, watching the waves roll in slowly, and then she looked back at him.

"Hell, if you get swept away, you can beat me up later," he told her with a laugh. "But I doubt seriously that that would happen, or that I would let that happen to you..."

And they walked in together, Natalie close by her friend, wincing each time that water crashed into her legs.

"It's cold, Brandon!" she yelped, feeling his arm around her waist.

"Oh, come on, girl," he said. "It's just water..."

They walked slowly, and Brandon coached her, "Yes, that's it...one foot and then the other...nothing's going to bite you... that's it...you've got it...not much longer..."

He stopped her when the azure water came waist deep, when the rolling waves crashed on her shoulders, when her hair was just wet enough, where she could get close to Brandon. Her wet lips grazed his wet shoulder, her fingertips were embedded in his back, and his arms around her. His strength lifted her up atop the waves, and Brandon's eyes sparkled each time that he laughed at her.

"Don't let me go," she told him.

"I won't, Nat," he laughed. "Relax..."

And after her struggle, they only waded, still holding one another, Brandon looking at her.

"Who were those girls?" she asked him.

Brandon looked away, toward the horizon, clearing his throat again.

"Sophia's friends," he said.

"And they know about me...?"

"Someway, somehow..."

"You talk about me like that?"

He looked at her. "I guess so..."

"Do you miss her?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Not when I'm around you..."

She pressed her fingers deeper into his back. The unfailing twists and turns in her stomach grew stronger each time that he moved his eyes, each time she recalled how he looked with those kids, each time she failed at an attempt to remember their friendship.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hope that that didn't come out the wrong way...but you just make me forget how I wasted three years of my life with the wrong person..."

"Everything happens for a reason," she reminded him. And her hands found the hairs at the back of his neck, moving them up and down. "You'll find the right person for you..."

He nodded slowly, glared at her strangely. She momentarily stopped breathing, as though she were waiting for the inevitable to happen. Her narrow eyes flickered across the different lengths and angles of his face, her lids heavy, brimming with a

visual satisfaction that needed a release. Then, he pulled away from her all within seconds.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he suggested, leading her to the shore.

They ended up back on the porch, with the sounds of the shoreline nearby. She unconsciously held onto Brandon’s arm, as they stood in front of the large, white rope hammock, suspended from the porch ceiling, swaying on its own. Brandon climbed into its web first.

"Come here, Nat," he murmured, pulling down his brown best friend with him. He rested his black head on his arms, and she nestled into the pit of his arm, the air, cooling their wet bodies. And the hammock swayed a little harder, the smell of saltwater filled their atmosphere, and the golden sunlight spilled happily onto the porch, splashing onto their skin.

"This is nice," she whispered, staring skyward.

"Yea," he replied, chuckling under his breath. "Sometimes it's good to just stop and let life unfold around you...just stop and take a deep breath...and forget the rest of world...you know?"

She nodded, and repositioned herself. Brandon squeezed her tighter in response and not long after fell fast asleep.

And, yes, that Natalie Chandler watched him ardently, writhing in slight discomfort in her closeness to him. But as the minutes went by, the sound of Brandon’s deep breathing soothed her, and the way the sun hit his face created a funny feeling in her stomach.

She sighed heavily, and the hammock swayed, and the cooling breeze blew, and she ached inside.

Was she the same naïve, country, sweetly ignorant Natalie Savannah? Not when she was around him, not when he showed her this world, his world.

She couldn’t explain the feeling she had inside then, hated herself for wanting to analyze it, place it into logical reasoning, instead of letting it be, instead of enjoying this sight, the comfortable, safe sight.

She hated it...hated the fact that he was beginning to mean the world to her, that her vulnerability prevailed, even in his peace.

She lifted her hand, touched his hair, felt light, felt life, and she hated it. She didn’t want to feel this way, didn’t want to care about him so much, and she sure as heck, with God as her witness, didn’t want to love him the way she did.

No good would come of loving him...

...

She was shocked to discover that Brandon could use a grill, recalling all of his failed attempts at cooking at the house on Trent road. She took her place in a white wicker chair at the picnic table on the back porch overlooking the ocean. It was twilight, the sun setting slowly over the expanded horizon, the rhythm of the currents slowing down, soft reggae playing from a player in the kitchen window. She watched Brandon, who looked comfortable in a pair of khaki cargo shorts and a t-

shirt, laugh with Scotty, who stood near him, a can of beer in his hand, witnessing his interaction with his roommate in a different way than what he treated her, listened to their sarcasm and toilet humor, took notice of the way he laughed more and more.

Sabrina, the redhead, sat beside her unwontedly, distracting her from her gazing. She placed a glass of wine in front of her, cleared her throat, and said, "You look like you need this..."

Natalie pushed the glass away. "I don't drink..."

"Oh," Sabrina said, retrieving the glass. "Not at all?"

"I'm only nineteen," Natalie told her.

"All the better reason," she said to her, pushing the glass back in front of her. "You're young...live it up..."

Natalie pushed the glass away. "Not in this lifetime...cloudy judgment just isn't my thing..."

She surprised herself at how assertive she was with the girl. She only wished Brandon could hear it. Natalie looked in his direction again, the smell of seasoned steak filling the warm air, and the music seemed louder, and this time he had a beer in his clutch, letting out an elongated belch.

"I see," the pretty redhead said, following Natalie's gaze. "Well...you know Brandon's a big drinker..."

"He's not that bad," Natalie said.

"Well, not normally," Sabrina began, taking a sip of the wine. "But after Sophia, you know, it just hit him hard. He had to have a drink all the time. It was scary, you know...you think

you know someone and then...poof...they go and become an alcoholic on you..."

Natalie turned her attention to her. The breeze grew stronger then.

"Yep," the redhead continued. "Sophia was the love of his life...I thought you knew that? Surely he talked about it with you?"

Natalie remained silent.

"He didn't?" she said. "Well...I don't understand...I thought you guys were 'best friends'?"

Silent still...

"He's still in love with her, you know. Told me just the other day..."

Natalie turned away and found it hard to swallow.

"That's why it's bizarre that he'd want you to come," Sabrina laughed. "It's quite funny, you know...the place that you're sleeping in tonight is the exact same place that Sophia was suppose to sleep...how's that for ironic? Or maybe...maybe she would be in Brandon's bed? Girl-to-girl, she said the sex was fantastic..."

She couldn't believe that she left in such a huff, and she hoped that Brandon didn't see her leave.

But he found her anyway, seated on the darkening sand by the water's edge, her brown toes buried beneath the sand. She quickly attempted to wipe the few fallen tears from her cheeks, disbelieving that she actually cried that way, and she got to her feet before him, his eyes widened before her.

“I was wondering where the hell you ran off to so fast,” he said, examining her face. “What’s up?”

She shook her head rapidly, attempting to move past him. But he stopped her, took her into his arms, brought his face close to hers, and said, “What’s up, Nat?”

She didn’t answer, only turned her head away, hoping that he didn’t see the redness in her eyes, hoping that her heart would stop racing soon...

“Are you uncomfortable?”

She hesitated initially, but nodded following as he rubbed her back gently.

“Why didn’t you say that?”

Natalie shrugged her shoulders.

“I can’t believe you, Nat,” he told her. “You’re going to let that bitch run you off like that?”

Natalie looked at him.

“Yea, I said it,” he laughed. “A bitch...I’ve always hated her...I should’ve known...”

Natalie laughed too. She hoped he understood.

Only if you understood...

“We can stay here,” he suggested. “You want to stay here? It looks like you want to just stay here...”

“You should get back to your friends,” Natalie advised.

Brandon scoffed. “Hell, they’re not going anywhere...you, on the other hand might, so I should hold you down for as long as possible...”

They sat down in the sand together, and he did something that she didn’t want, didn’t expect, didn’t need to happen...

He leaned in and kissed the side of her face, assiduously and she exhaled heavily.

. . .

He found Natalie the next afternoon sunk into the porch hammock. She was reading the book she’d packed, leafing through it swiftly as though she were embarking upon a desperate attempt to keep her mind from wandering. She’d left Brandon at the beach with Scotty an hour prior, and was rather startled when he stomped onto the porch and knelt beside her, forcefully stopping the hammock from swaying, making her roll over uncomfortably with it.

“What’s the matter?” she asked him. His shoulders were covered in dry white sand, hair wet.

He spent a few seconds attempting to catch his breath before speaking.

“Sophia,” he murmured, swallowing hard.

“What about her, Bran? Did she call you?”

“She’s here.”

“Here? Here, where?”

“I saw her on the beach.”

“Our beach?”

He nodded.

“Did she see you?”

He then shook his head. “But I saw her...saw her with Eric.”

“Eric? That white guy from the wrestling team?”

He nodded again. She put her book down and sat up, looking at him. He looked absolutely pitiful.

She wondered why her heart began to pound at that moment, wondered why his reaction over Sophia bothered her.

Then Natalie Chandler shook the sensation off as silly, cleared her throat and began.

“Brandon, you shouldn’t...you shouldn’t worry,” she said, reaching back to push his hair out of his face. “They could just be friends...like you and I are friends.”

This gave her best friend a funny look on his face, and he remained silent. She couldn’t tell whether or not this expression was about her...or Sophia.

“They’re just friends,” she whispered, the breeze now picking up, louder than her delicate southern voice. “You made the right decision, Brandon...whether you think so or not...you made the right one...”

Her hand was still on his head. Brandon Greene nodded slowly, appearing slightly convinced.

She’d never seen him so shook.

...

In another hour, they were on his bed in their tight bedroom, his clothes now shamelessly thrown about the floor. A small window above his bed was cracked to let air through, and she was reminded of how awake she’d been the night before, reminded of how terrible his snore was, reminded of the hour or two they’d spent on the beach.

But, she lounged near her shaken best friend then, watching his silence, patiently waiting for him to say something, finding the whole ordeal darkly funny.

But, what could be said? Wasn’t he the one who ended it? How could he not think that what he did was the only thing that made sense? Surely this boy didn’t think that what he had with this girl was healthy? Did he not admit it himself?

She wanted to tell him so then. She wanted to tell him how frustrated she was with the fact that they were wasting this trip worried about his feelings for that girl.

So what if she came? What should that change?

“She did it to spite me,” he told her finally.

Natalie shook her head slowly. “I hardly think so, Bran...”

“Why wouldn’t she? I mean, she knew I was going to be here. We come here every year...”

“You shouldn’t stress over it,” she told him quietly. “So what? Look at what she did to you? You’re going to let her see that she’s still got you?”

Brandon threw his body back onto the narrow bed, groaned, “Natalie...”

“Well, what in the bejesus do you want me to say? Do you want me to say that I think you’re acting like a girl? Because you are...”

He looked at her.

“Well, it’s true...”

“I disagree...”

“Well, if not a girl...then a humongous baby...”

“Never,” he said, moving his eyes from her to the ceiling.

There was a knock on the door shortly following, and Scotty entered the room quietly, setting his bottom down on Natalie's made bed.

"What am I interrupting?" he asked.

"Brandon's lost his balls..."

Scotty laughed under his breath. "Well, I'd say that's no good...I can venture to guess that it's about Sophia?"

"Who else?" Natalie shrugged.

Scotty sighed deeply. Brandon continued to stare at the ceiling.

"But, I thought you were the one who dumped her?"

"Exactly what I said," Natalie smiled, tapping Brandon's stomach once.

"Well," Scotty Kelly sang. "She's downstairs if you want to talk to her..."

Brandon Greene sat up, looked at his curly-headed companion, and mumbled, "Are you fucking serious?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Is she with Eric?" she asked Scotty.

He shook his head slowly. "Nope, don't know where he went after we saw them at the beach earlier...but she definitely came alone..."

Brandon and Natalie met eyes and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Do what you want," she told him. "I have no control over what you do..."

Brandon nodded compliantly and pushed his tall body off of the small bed. He then moved toward the door, took one glance in her direction and left the room.

...

Scotty coaxed her into walking with him on the beach that late afternoon. They watched the natural golden light mark the current beneath it, heard the drone of a lone airplane flying above, saw a small white sailboat, skim the waves against the horizon.

She liked Scotty - more than she ever thought she would. His naturally funny demeanor had both her and Brandon laughing to the point of tears, and she enjoyed listening to him, a music major, talk passionately about loving melodies and harmonies and rifts and what he planned to do with it when he graduated. She'd also grown accustomed to watching him with Brandon, loving their interaction, loving the way that they picked on each other, loving the fact that Scotty was his voice of reason when she wasn't around.

They walked a slow pace, past a chain of brightly colored beach houses. Barefoot, they walked close to the clear shoreline, the white sand, clinging to their toes.

"I can't believe he's talking to her," he said quietly, breaking the silence. "Sometimes, he makes me so mad..."

"You're telling me..."

He chuckled, looking her direction. "I see it, you know..."

She met his glance. "See what?"

"You and him..."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You're funny..."

"I see it, Natalie," he told her, pinching her waist, teasingly.

"I see that it's bothering you that he's talking to her right now..."

"He can do what he wants..."

"Don't lie to me, Natalie," he said. "You care...you try to hide it, but you care...I swear, if you didn't, you wouldn't be here right now, putting up with his bullshit, like I do..."

Her stomach fluttered. "Nonsense..."

"I mean, I don't get what he sees in her," he said, throwing his hands up. "But, you know, I've tried through and through to put that guy onto some other girls, but she's the only girl he's ever wanted since freshman year...well, until you came along..."

Natalie exhaled heavily. "Scott, please..."

"I'm serious, girl," he told her. "Like I said, I see it, you don't..."

"Is she pretty?" she asked him lowly.

Scotty paused, as if to think hard. Then, he nodded with a grin. "Yea, I can see why he'd be so fixed...she's pretty fucking hot..."

"Well, there you go..."

"But, you are too...in a different way," he said. "That's it! You're different!"

"Really? I hadn't noticed..."

"Well," he laughed. "Besides the more obvious difference..."

"Scotty, trust me you," Natalie began, setting her hand on his shoulder. "Brandon's a number of things...and all of those things are ones I am not...therefore...you already know what I'm trying to say..."

Scotty chuckled, lowered his head and shook it. "If you say so, Natalie...maybe you should get to know the Brandon Greene that I know...then, you'd see why I'm still around..."

...

Scotty returned to the house and she walked alone at sunset. She headed back up the beach in the direction in which she came, passing their humble green beach house on the left, the golden shoreline on the right, and a small barrier of rocks up ahead. The wind, strong, caught her then, and she walked with her head lowered.

And, of course, she thought about him then, as most would when they'd internally admitted their feelings for someone. She thought of him and Sophia, wondered why he loved her so much, what kept him coming back.

She realized then, that the subject of love was foreign to her. Or at least the love that kept his heart tied to Sophia so tightly. All she knew of it was the fact that it made people crazy, do the insanely strange things to each other that they wouldn't normally do. She'd seen the way that love affected her parents so long ago, and questioned if love was the reason

that prompted her Dominican-bred father to slap her mama over a couple of times. Yes, in Natalie's eyes, love bred control, deceit, and drama, none of which she could live with. Nonetheless, the young southern girl felt the pull of jealousy then.

You're an idiot, you silly girl. What are you going to do now? How are you going to look at him? You're not good at hiding your emotions, so what makes you think that you'll be able to hide these? You won't! And he'll figure it out, and he'll stop calling you as much as he does. Because he's still in love with her, isn't he? Yes, just like the girl said, he's still in love with her. Have you not paid any attention to the way he looks when you mention her name? It's like she died or something.

"You're Natalie..."

Natalie turned around. A young woman sat, perched atop the barrier of slick rocks, her knees in the embrace of her short arms. Her blond hair shimmered, against the warm glow of twilight, was full, long, curly and wild. She was petite with the slightest hint of a shape. She donned a tiny waist, slender curves and a full bust to prove it. There was softness that lied in her face. Her small features were reminiscent of a pixie.

She took a long drag of the long cigarette between her lips, blew the smoke in a ring through the small opening in her mouth and looked at her.

"Aren't you?" she pressed.

Natalie nodded.

"Of course you are," the blond said quietly. "How many pretty black girls are there on Jekyll Island? You might be the first. Do you know who I am?"

Natalie nodded. "Yes...yes, I do...I should get going..."

She started to walk away, felt a slight brush of relief roll over her.

"Do you ever wonder why we've never met before, Natalie Chandler?"

Natalie didn't respond. Instead, she halted and nervously turned around again, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

They locked eyes for a moment, and Natalie clasped her hands together tightly, taking a deep breath, feeling the wind carry her hair. She couldn't help but take notice of how piercing Sophia Baldwin's green eyes were.

"I was perplexed," she began, taking another drag. "Really. I'd heard very little about you, yet, your name always popped up in his phone. And I was told that he was seen walking around with you on campus everyday. He'd have his arm around you, he'd be laughing. And some said that they would see him driving on campus at an odd hour in the morning. And I felt his attention slowly deteriorate. He stopped doing the things that he used to do for me, and I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't figure out why my boyfriend of over three years stopped loving me...why he stopped paying attention to me. Do you know why that happened, Natalie Chandler? And then one day, I had to do something about it. I slept with Eric. I slept with him because I was not getting the attention that I de-

served. And it backfired, didn't it? My boyfriend told me that it was over. And a few weeks later, I find out from my two best friends...you've met Monica and Sabrina, haven't you? Yes, they told me that Brandon had invited the same black girl that they'd seen with him on campus so many times to the island. My two best friends even had the audacity to tell me that they were staying in the same room. I'd never met you, Natalie Chandler, because he knew that the moment I lay eyes on you I would hate you. And I do...*I really* hate you."

What could she say? Could she necessarily apologize for something she was certain wasn't her fault? No, she wouldn't do it. She couldn't apologize to someone who'd hurt her friend so badly, could she?

Natalie Chandler remained silent. And she watched a tear fall down Sophia's cheek.

"I wanted to marry him," Sophia Baldwin continued, tossing her cigarette to the waves.

She watched the blond crumble into tears.

"He was so cold to me. And I knew that you had fixed him. I saw you in his eyes. I read you all over him. And that's why I hate you."

Chapter 6

←

LOW TIDE UNDER THE MOON

→



SHE DESCENDED a small dune of white sand, pushing past the sea oats at half-past midnight. She hadn't seen him since that afternoon, since he went to talk to Sophia, and now she was searching for him.

She wasn't sure what caused her to go running after him. Conceivably, she wanted to see what form of fate lay in store for him and his Sophia. Yes, she only wanted him to make the right choice; but she was certain that she could no longer interfere. The toss of her heart had become a dangerous playing ground, and she could no longer allow him to look at her that way. She wasn't sure that her peace of mind could stand for much more of it.

She found him, emerging from the slow moving waves, striding against the current, along the shore slowly. She pinched at the hem of her feather-light white sundress, undulating in the cool breeze, that staved off the stale heat of the day, that left her poor brown skin suffering.

They connected eyes, and she continued to step forward, and with each press of her foot into the mushy golden sand, she felt a part of her reserve subside. His eyes seemed to glow through the curtain of his untamed black hair, and his bare chest bore a thin layer of glistening saltwater, which slowly rolled down his stomach with each step that he took.

In a final forlorn attempt, before her eyes gave way to her true feelings, she reminded herself of what she had to do; she would let her feelings go, she would let him go. She felt that she had to do it for the sake of their friendship, as strange as it was, and for the sake of her sanity.

These feelings had come to frighten her a little, and she longed for the days where he meant absolutely nothing to her.

Those were the times where she refused to be a sucker for anyone...

They stopped right before their bodies touched, eyes still locked.

"I met Sophia," she whispered along the breeze.

She studied his countenance. Why did it suddenly unnerve her that he looked so calm, so unaffected? Shouldn't there have been more of a reaction?

"Oh?" he replied, his eyebrows raised.

Natalie nodded slowly.

"And did she say anything interesting?"

He was mocking her, surely, as if he didn't understand the gravity of the situation.

"She doesn't like me, Brandon," Natalie admitted childishly. "She doesn't like me at all."

Brandon sighed hard. "I know this..."

"You know?"

He nodded slowly. "Of course, I know, Nat...you think I'm just completely unaware of my surroundings, don't you?"

She didn't answer.

"She told me to stop seeing you," he divulged. "But I don't think she realized how hard it would be..."

He reached out for her brown face, cupped it in his hand, and exhaled. And he took her wrist then, pulled her in slowly, found her forehead with his, and he sighed while she closed her eyes.

She took a deep breath. Common sense told her to back away. But her heart...her heart was just as speechless, just as breathless as she was.

He felt so good near her; something felt right about it, something felt complete about it.

There was nothing strange about his proximity. She temporarily forgot about his Sophia, or the fact that she hated her, or Sophia's stupid girlfriends. All that mattered was Brandon, his warm skin, his soul, the sound of the current, and the breeze that swept passed them.

Part of her wanted to let go of him so badly; and the other part was sinking faster, harder and deeper by each passing second.

"Nat..." he breathed.

The ugly face of reality took an abrupt step in. She pushed him away and took a step back.

"Brandon...I..."

He stepped toward her once more. "It's over, Natalie...it's really over," he whispered.

She shook her head anyway, and she turned away. "No, no...I don't believe you..."

"What do you mean?" he was behind her and he placed his hand on her back. "Can I not say that it's over? I told her...I told her that it was over...I told her that you and I were..."

"Don't say it...God, please don't say it..."

Silence fell between them. Natalie sunk her teeth into her bottom lip.

"I don't know why I'm here, Brandon," she began quietly.

He pressed himself against her back took her shoulders with his hands and pressed his cheek against her temple. She closed her eyes again.

"Brandon..."

"There's so many things that I want to say to you...that... that I want to tell you..."

Did he really have to? Could she not feel it? Could he not feel her?

She pulled away again.

She thought she'd gained her freedom then. She started to walk away, and with each step, she was certain that she felt her reservations unite again. This was her moment to let him go, to show him that he meant nothing to her. This was her final stand.

"Where the hell are you going now?" he called after her.

She didn't respond. Consequently, she'd made the decision to hold her breath until she got away from him...

He started to follow her, calling after her. She walked faster. She had to get away...

"Leave me alone," she whimpered with exhaustion.

"Come back here."

No, coming back to him would mean the worst, would mean that all her feelings would come to light.

"Why do I have to?" she said, finding it difficult to walk in the sand.

"Because I want you to..."

He'd caught up with her, walking alongside her.

“Ha, not a good reason,” she said. “Just...leave me alone...”

“I told you I wasn’t leaving you, so I’m not going to start now...”

“Well, you should have thought about that when you left me alone with Scotty,” she said. “We walked along the beach together, you know...”

Brandon grabbed hold to her arm and stopped her. “And you liked that, yes?”

“Of course,” she told him, staring at him. “We’re getting close, you know...”

“I noticed...”

And Natalie Chandler began to question how they’d gotten to this point, why she let it get this far. She then regretted not listening to Asha when she specifically said that going to the beach with Brandon alone was a bad idea.

Brandon came toward her, slowly, and she made a last attempt at trying to keep her emotional distance.

But she failed, didn’t she? She failed the moment that she reached up and touched his face. That was the moment then, wasn’t it? That was the moment that she gave up everything. Just for that moment, right? Just long enough for her to look at him, see him differently for that one moment, and lose it. And that beautiful white boy moved in closely, slowly so, she felt his warm breath on her cheek.

She couldn’t remember the last time she felt this way.

He touched her. That was enough.

She gave up everything when he pressed his lips against hers; she gave up her inhibitions, her common sense, her heart. She was convinced that this was her moment of liberation. There was no awkwardness, no strife...Brandon’s lips were full and soft and attentive...and she took him wholly. He wrapped her in a full embrace, as her heart tackled this moment of release, as his wet hair tickled her forehead. She felt light and dreamy and witless.

Fear had dissipated.

They pulled apart slowly and stared at each other. She rolled her lips in, he panted, staring at her with those pretty eyes of his. A look a satisfaction crossed them.

She backed away again.

“Natalie...” he called to her through his ridged breaths. She backed away further and she started shaking her head.

“You can’t have me,” she proclaimed through a broken voice. “You’re not over her...you can’t have me...I don’t want to be a fix for your loneliness...”

“But you’re not...Nat, I...”

“Stop it...don’t say it...you can’t have me...”

And she walked away.

Chapter 7

←

THE DATELESS
DINNER PARTY

→



“A DINNER PARTY?”

Natalie walked into Asha’s bedroom, saw her sitting on her bed, sorting through sheets of small, pink, rectangular paper. Natalie read over them a little, noticed that they were invitations and her eyebrows furrowed.

“A dinner party?” she repeated, expecting Asha to answer instantly.

“God, did anyone ever teach you that reading over people’s shoulders was rude?”

“When is this ‘dinner party?’”

Asha continued to fumble with the invitations, as if she were purposely ignoring her friend. “Hmm, let’s see, that’s fifteen invitations, dress nicely, eight o’ clock, five-course meal, come hungry, alcohol will not be provided...”

Natalie looked at Asha’s small wooden nightstand, and retrieved a book with a table place setting covered in confetti and votive candles on the cover, appropriately named, *So, You Want to Throw a Dinner Party?*

Natalie chuckled a little bit. “A book? You actually bought a book? Asha, you don’t even buy groceries, how in the world are you going to—“

Asha slid off the bed, and headed in the direction of her living room, pinching her twenty-five invitations between her fingers, mumbling things to herself.

“What?” Asha said suddenly as they entered the living room together. “A sister can’t throw a dinner party for her friends? What, black people aren’t classy enough to organize a get together? Music! Something laid back, none of that crazy

rap mess, something classy. And some rock music for my white guests...what do you think I should include for them?”

In the confusion, Natalie followed Asha around the living room, watching her friend point out different things, watching her accept and nix ideas left and right. In the meantime, Natalie was able to process a few things in her head...

“Asha...”

“Maybe some of that folksy stuff, that’ll go along good, won’t it? What’s the artist that all the white folks in the cafeteria are clinging to these days?”

“Asha...”

“Britney? Nah, too old...Norah Jones? Yes...yes...”

Asha continued walking, continued ignoring her friend, and in the process, Natalie grabbed her friend by the shoulder, and said, “Asha, who did you invite?”

“Nat, you really must learn how to relax sometimes...I have white friends, you know...”

Asha gave her friend a strange grin.

“Asha, what white friends?”

“Chicken! Chicken will be the main course...baked chicken!”

She followed Asha into the kitchen, watched her begin to rummage through the cabinets above the countertops.

“Asha,” Natalie said. “Are you planning on inviting Brandon?”

“Chicken and plenty of love songs...I feel like love’s going to be in the air that night...”

Asha grinned strangely again, nudged her shoulder and headed back towards the living room.

“Asha, you’re not inviting Brandon...”

“Hmm, love...”

“Asha, I repeat you’re not inviting Brandon Greene...”

Asha ran her hand along the length of one of the white couches in the living room. “Hmm, these couches will have to go...maybe they’ll be dancing...*slow* dancing...”

“Asha...”

“Oh, Lord, have mercy, Natalie Chandler! What if I was talking about Scott Kelly? And for the record, my poor black friend, it was just one kiss...you really need to learn how to relax...”

Natalie knew that she meant Brandon, considering the fact that Asha had only met Scotty once, when the four of them met up for a late night movie a couple of weeks prior. Afterwards, they returned to the house on Trent road, discovered their mutual love for underground rap, and argued why a producer made this group happen or why a rapper was weaker than the other.

“Asha, who told you about that kiss...?”

She knew the answer to the question immediately, knew that whenever either Asha or Brandon couldn’t get any information out of Natalie, they’d confide in each other. Natalie only naturally assumed that Asha pulled Brandon for information, because Natalie was clearly too afraid to say anything about what happened.

“Well, since you, one of my best girlfriends, decided that I wasn’t important enough to tell, who else was on the beach that night...by the water...the dark, dark water...?”

Asha’s teasing tone instantly brought her back to the night she stood in front of Brandon on the beach, her feelings slowly becoming harder to control, renewing all of her ardency about keeping her distance from him.

After the beach trip, she chose to ignore his phone calls. She anticipated the jest of the conversation and wanted to run in the opposite direction. Much easier than dealing with the truth, she figured. At this point, she wasn’t sure if she even missed him.

"Natalie...it's me...call me back..."

"Nat...I know you have your phone in your hand...I know you feel it vibrating...I know you see my name on the Caller ID...the missing step is you picking up the phone and answering it..."

"If I've scared you, I totally understand...but don't shut me out...we need to talk about this either way...call me back..."

Well, maybe she did just a little...

Every once in awhile, she'd writhe with discomfort. She'd feel a tingling sensation run the length of her body. A flooding gush of blood would run straight to her heart and fill it to the point where she grew dizzy from it.

A kiss like *that* was hard to shake.

It would take days to put her feelings into fluid, logical sections. Streamlined thinking had been tossed out the window.

She had now succumbed to noticing the little things about him: his wide, enchantingly crooked smile, the formation of his eyes when he focused on something, the silly things that they laughed about that no one else understood, his inexplicably intoxicating smell, the way the sound of any song she heard reminded her of him. Looking and thinking of him would change everything.

As if they already hadn't.

...

Asha planned the dinner party for the Saturday before finals. The weather the week of the dinner was warm, and Natalie found herself outside more than she ever thought she would be. There was something about reading under the large oak tree outside of her dorm that brought her unexpected peace.

Brandon's persistence had ceased that week, and it was only then that part of her missed him, that part of her wished that he was sitting next to her.

He graduated that month. Brandon Greene, part of the real world.

She felt a little pang inside of her when she thought about him leaving. Then she internally reprimanded herself for caring that much.

It was at that moment that she thought about calling him; but changed her mind.

She would let these feelings ride, let them subside gracefully, forget them eventually.

She sat under the tree on Wednesday, felt something in her pocket vibrate, and when she retrieved her cell phone, she took a deep breath.

"Hello?"

"Nat, you're cooking, aren't you?"

"Cooking? Asha, I don't have time to cook..."

"Oh, Nat, please! All fifteen people confirmed. I need you to cook!"

"I can't cook a five-course meal and study for finals...it's enough that I'm even coming..."

"Nat, please...my food will be disgusting...you're the best cook I know..."

Natalie huffed. "Asha, I don't know..."

"Look, if you cook, I'll...I'll...I'll tell Brandon that the dinner is cancelled...that way you don't have to see him...deal?"

Natalie liked the sound of that idea. She released another heavy breath.

"Deal," she said.

So, she arrived five hours prior to the dinner, hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, wore a slinky red bulldogs t-shirt and a pair of Sidney's old cheerleading shorts. She'd prepared a menu prior to the Saturday, keeping in mind the traditional taste buds of people in their twenties. She brought in Asha's stereo from her bedroom, and found herself dancing while she worked on her main course. She reveled in the fact that Brandon Greene would not be in attendance.

As the chicken baked, Natalie helped Asha move the living room furniture out and into the extra bedroom that no one lived in. She then assisted her in placing a series of cream-

colored votive candles about the living room as the late afternoon sun spilled into the room. They draped a red cloth atop the dining table and Asha wrote each guest's name on small white cards, and placed them on the table.

"You were serious about this, weren't you?" Natalie asked her friend, as they placed large pillows on the hardwood floor in the living room.

Asha smiled. "Yes, Natalie... a sister's trying to be classy... let her!"

Asha helped her friend with the appetizer and salad, and they danced to the radio, sang off-key and laughed. It was also at these moments that Natalie loved her friend, really, really loved her.

Natalie finished the dessert in perfect timing. They each had an hour to get dressed.

Natalie showered in Asha's bathroom, ordered her friend to retrieve her dress from her car: a strapless, black chiffon number that she hated splurging on, but Asha absolutely loved on her slender frame. She accompanied slinky gold earrings with it, wore her hair in a loose chignon, which made Asha, once entering the living room with her completed look, suck in her teeth.

"How are you going to show up the hostess at her own party? It's just not right."

Asha helped her put the final touches on the food, helped her carry the dishes to the red-clothed table, and they lit the myriad of candles about the bare living room floor, giving the room an unmistakable golden glow. And Asha started the music.

And in moments it seemed, the guests arrived, in pairs, boy and girl. One couple brought a bottle of wine and glasses, another couple brought deep red roses.

"Asha!" one girl said who greeted her at the door. "This looks amazing! Absolutely amazing, girl..."

Natalie stood to the side, watched another three couples enter, watched them crowd into their own little circle, while one of the boys popped open a bottle of wine, and poured each person a glass, patiently waited till Asha got done greeting and conversing and receiving accolades.

And Natalie counted the guests.

Fourteen.

"Shall we eat?" Asha told her guests.

Asha guided the guests toward the table of food, and Natalie took her friend's shoulder, gently pulling her aside.

"Shouldn't we wait for the fifteenth guest?"

Asha smiled, glanced toward the door and said, "Oh, looky, he's here."

Natalie turned around and her heart jumped to her throat.

He wore a black blazer, partially open, revealing a black shirt underneath, and a pair of dark rinse jeans hugged his narrow hips. Natalie swallowed hard.

Ignoring him seemed to be the only conclusion she could come to.

"Aw, how cute, you guys match," Asha said with a sly snicker, walking in the direction of the congregation of her guests.

As Brandon approached her, she folded her arms, attempted to form something clever to say in her head, and when he stopped before her, she parted her lips to speak, and then, without warning, pure surprise of course, said, "Gee, I'm hungry," and headed toward the red-clothed table.

She followed suit moments later, having watched Brandon greet Asha, giving her a small kiss on the cheek, sharing a

small laugh with her. Then they each turned and looked at Natalie, and Asha pursed her lips at her friend's foolishness.

While the other guests sat on the floor and ate, Natalie stood on the wall by Asha, who asked her why she hadn't talked to Brandon. They then glanced in his direction, he, who sat in gentle solace on a large pillow.

"I thought you said that if I cooked, you wouldn't invite Brandon...?"

Asha shoved a piece of chicken into her mouth to keep her from answering the question. "Mm, this chicken sure is good, Natalie," Asha forced through a mouth full of food.

"Asha...this isn't funny."

Asha swallowed the remainder of the food in her mouth and said, "Oh lighten up, would you girl? One...he's your best friend and *two*...he hasn't even bothered you all night...as a matter of fact, I think he's more concerned with Jennifer Diaz right now...apparently you didn't catch the way that he looked at her when he went to get his food..."

Natalie followed Asha's gaze to the petite, curvaceous, light-skinned Jen, who, too, sat alone, in all of her gorgeous curly-headed Afro-Cuban glory.

The weird feeling in her stomach returned, along with a stint of anger, and...*jealousy*? Was that what she felt?

No. She *refused* to allow herself to be jealous of the way Brandon looked at Jennifer Diaz.

With a huff, Natalie went into the kitchen, dug her fingers into the countertop and attempted to occupy herself with something. She knew that she was making more noise than was necessary and huffed some more.

But her brain churned anyway.

Natalie, quit this now! Where's the dessert? Look for the dessert, girl! Stop these foolish thoughts!

Jesus, you think you know someone!

How could he forget their late nights? Their laughs? Their talks? Did he realize that no one listened better than her? How could he forget that no one was more there for him than she was? How could he not see that she cared about him?

Natalie Chandler stepped toward the kitchen door, and the music changed, and she peered into the dark, votive-lit room, and saw it, just as she had predicted...

Brandon and Jen Diaz, sharing a pillow on the floor, she, the curly-headed beauty, sipping from a glass of red wine, leaning into him. She wanted to make herself feel relief, relief that he was no longer fixated on her, that he could actually talk to other girls, and finally get over Sophia.

She hastily composed herself, setting the dessert down on the serving table, rejoining the other guests, who now had returned to the center of the floor, dancing gingerly to a piano, jazzy number, and the candles flickered.

She watched him, but tried not to.

She peered on as Jennifer Diaz, stood up, took him by the hands and attempted to pull him up with her, as if to coax him into dancing with her. Brandon kept his place, and after a few moments of visible persuasion, she gave up, and walked toward the other guests.

She witnessed him get to his feet, walk to the serving table and pour himself a glass of red wine. He took a sip in a sophisticated manner, placing his free hand inside his jean pockets, appearing much different than the guy who sat on the couch at the house on Trent road with three beers in his clutch, rudely belching just to annoy her.

Brandon Greene met her gaze, eyes widened in her direction, pursed his lips playfully, and he stepped toward her, his

strides long and slow. He stood beside her and took a deep breath.

“Your food was delicious,” he commented, taking another sip of wine.

She exhaled deeply and said, “Thank you, Brandon...”

Natalie focused her eyes on the crowd before her. She couldn’t look at him...Lord only knows what would happen if she looked at him.

“Where’s your date?”

“What?”

“Your date...where is he?”

Natalie sighed, folded her arms, felt the discomfort cover her. “There’s no date, Brandon...”

“I see...did you give him the wrong address? That must be it...”

“There’s no date, Brandon,” she repeated. “Where is yours? I do believe that Asha said that you were allowed to bring one extra person...”

“Maybe to the rest of the guests,” he said. “But Asha definitely didn’t give me that memo...she said come alone and come looking good...”

“Well you got one of those down pat...”

“You’re hilarious...”

Brandon looked toward the dancing guests for a moment, and she followed his gaze, which landed on Jennifer Diaz.

“She’s pretty,” Natalie commented, trying to sound supportive.

Brandon nodded methodically. “That she is...”

“Almost pretty enough to go over there and talk to her...”

“Already done that,” he said, sipping his wine. “She’s a junior, wants to be a vet, doing a little modeling to make ends meet...”

“Sounds perfect...”

“Hmph...”

“So...go talk to her...”

“Nat, are you trying to pawn me off?”

Natalie Chandler folded her arms. “I’m just being a friend, that’s all...isn’t this what Scotty does when you guys go out?”

“More or less...”

“Then, why can’t I?”

“I’ll choose not to answer that question,” he said quietly.

“Besides, she already gave me her phone number...”

Natalie felt light headed. “So...will you call her?”

He didn’t answer. He only sipped his wine, bobbed his head to the music he’d probably never heard before and glanced her over quickly.

“You look amazing...” He said.

“What?”

“Amazing...is what you look.”

“Thank you, Brandon.”

“And you keep saying my name like that because?”

“I don’t know, Brandon...”

“Why don’t you work your magic and snag you a guy out there? I’m sure one is dying to talk to you...”

“All taken,” Natalie remarked. “But I definitely would...”

“You would?”

“Yes,” she said. “Asha has some very handsome male friends...”

“Male, *black* friends...”

“That, too,” she sighed. She looked at Jen Diaz again.

“You should call her...”

“I’ll pass...she’s just not me...”

“Your eyes spoke otherwise...”

“So...you *were* watching me...”

“A quick glance is more like it...”

Brandon chuckled lowly. “I see...you fool no one, Natalie.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Brandon...”

Brandon sipped from the glass again, smacked his lips, sighed and said, “When you pretend as if you don’t need me... as much as I need you...”

Natalie looked at him then.

“Yep,” Brandon continued. “It’s almost hilarious to watch.”

He finished off the remains of his glass, studied it for a second, smacked his lips again, and walked away. Natalie watched him place his glass down, reach for Asha on the dance floor, kiss her cheek again, and head towards the door.

Natalie huffed again, feeling a sense of defeat wave over her, and she heard the music again. She hated that it still reminded her of him.

Asha approached her side, dancing a two-step, snapping her fingers, and whispered, “What the hell are you still doing here?”

“What are you talking about? I’m at your dinner party...”

“Yes, yes, blah, blah,” Asha began, still dancing. “When will you stop playing around?”

“What?”

“Don’t play stupid, Natalie Chandler,” she said, standing still. “I’ve watched this for weeks. The back and the forth, and the phone calls, and the looks, and your pitiful state of denial. I’m sick of it! If you don’t go out there and get him, then I won’t ever speak to you again. Because letting this one pass will be the dumbest thing you’ll ever do...”

Natalie dashed outside - the ultimate foolery of her previous actions befuddled her, but she chose to suppress them.

She caught the lofty figure in black just as he opened the door to his car.

She stood just before the green Explorer, saw him freeze, saw him take his hand off of the door handle and fold his arms across his broad chest.

Everything inside of her hurt, everything moved. She took a deep breath.

“Take me home,” she said.

And he did, and when he stopped in front of her dormitory building, she paused for a moment. She felt his eyes on her, felt the silence swim around them, the unspoken feelings, the tension.

And she sighed, felt the relief wave over her, and she said, “I like you...a lot...”

He only smiled and replied, “I know.”

She kept her eyes away from his.

“I’m not sure,” she continued, her brows furrowed in confusion. “But I think I might love you...”

“As you should,” he said in a low voice, reaching for her hand.

She sighed. “I don’t like it when you look at other girls...”

“I won’t ever do it again...”

“I don’t like being jealous...”

“You’ll never have a need to be...”

“I don’t like arguing...”

“Making up is the greatest...”

“You graduate,” she told him.

“Graduate school, and I’ve got the house...”

“You’re white...and I’m black...”

“Hasn’t stopped us before...”

“You really think that this could work?”

“I love you...”

She looked at him. His smile grew larger. Those three words chilled her.

Clearing her throat, she murmured, "I don't give in easily."

"I like a chase..."

"I'm a virgin..."

"I don't need it..."

Their foreheads touched. "People will stare..."

"People don't matter..."

"I hate the music that you listen to..."

"We can listen to something you like for a change..."

"Your driving is appalling..."

"I'll do better," he assured her.

"Your feet stink..."

"I'll wash them twice for you..."

Natalie allowed herself to smile. "You really want to be with me?"

Brandon chuckled again. "Always have, Nat...always have..."

Chapter 8

SHOW ME THE
SKY & A
DRAGONFLY



NATALIE AND ASHA MET UP with the boys at Abby's on the east side, and after hearing them go on and on about how she and her other brown skinned companion were always late, the girls sat down with them at a small booth in the back, shared a plate of crabs, and as soon as Natalie mentioned something about her birthday fast approaching, she watched her three closest friend's faces turn.

"Y'all forgot, didn't you?" Natalie asked them, dropping her butter-smearred napkin on the table, leaning forward. She looked at Brandon.

"Not necessarily," Asha answered first.

"So, that means that you did?"

"Like she said," Scotty interjected. "Not necessarily..."

There was a pause. Natalie looked at Brandon, who sat across from her, and watched his eyes slowly move from Scotty, to Asha, then to her. And then a slow grin formed on his face, the same way it did when she was almost certain that that boy was up to something.

Natalie pointed her finger in her boyfriend's direction.

"You. What's that smile for?"

Brandon quickly changed his expression. "Nothing, baby...I was just thinking of something funny..."

"And you can't share it?"

"Not this one," he responded, rolling his lips in.

"So, we keep secrets from each other now?"

"Natalie, calm down," Brandon said, reaching across the table for her hand.

"It's not that serious," Asha assured her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Truly isn't," Scotty added. "It's a really silly joke..."

"The worse joke I've ever heard," Brandon said.

Asha made some sort of snorting sound to keep from laughing, and when Natalie looked in her direction, she rolled her lips in, in the same fashion that Brandon had some minutes before.

"Why don't y'all just tell me what's going on?"

"What's the fun in that?" Scotty shrugged.

"Exactly," Brandon said, reaching for his beer bottle. "If Natalie is patient then she'll find out soon enough."

He looked at her, gave her a quick wink, and finished the last of his beer.

"I agree," Asha said. "The more she's patient, the better it'll be for her..."

. . .

She wasn't a fan of all of the secrecy that surrounded her that following week; they each laughed at her, as though they had been in on a large secret all along and had cohesively plotted to keep it away from her.

They must have enjoyed seeing her squirm.

Under the circumstances, however, she kept her cool. As far as they needed to know, she didn't care very much about celebrating her twentieth birthday at all.

She wasn't necessarily accustomed to celebrating her birthday with candles and bright, billowy birthday cakes and balloons and clowns anyway.

She left her lab in the early evening, in the middle of that week, and headed in the direction of the large soccer fields on East Campus, under warm October sunlight and crisp, breezy autumn air. The fields were shaded by fanning branches of

oaks and reddened maple leaves, slightly overgrown, and she spotted him instantly, tall, with white shorts, three-stripe tube socks, an old soccer uniform from his high school days and a long, athletic frame, legs sprawling out to kick the ball.

If she admired nothing else about him, she would admire his physical appearance, his long legs, his high kicks, the way he grunted when he missed the ball, the determination, the hunger, the drive of competition flooding his eyes. She would admire how beautiful he looked.

She would admire the fact that he was *hers*; him and that pretty body of his.

This is what he'd done all summer, when he wasn't around her, helping her get situated in the bedroom in Asha's apartment; ordering pizzas with Scotty; lounging around on her grandmother's old sofa; watching television; eating all of her food and drinking all of her juice; or getting on her last nerve with his belching and stomach-scratching and yawning and breaking everything in his path with his oversized clumsiness.

Brandon Greene was on that field, with his friends, joking and playing, kicking and grunting, hoping that he didn't lose so he wouldn't have to buy each guy on the opposing side beers at the pub downtown.

Aside from all the soccer playing, and the apartment invasions, they'd spent the summer beneath the trees, she, falling more in love with him than she ever could have imagined.

But she could never tell him so.

Actually formulating her lips to express the words "I", "love" and "you" seemed even scarier than how he made her feel.

The mere unspoken comfort and feeling of his proximity was enough for her.

He spotted her when they were done playing, and she approached him quietly.

He placed his arm around her shoulder, breathing hard, drenched with sweat.

When he tried to kiss her, she pushed him away, smiling, and said, "Don't, you smell."

This only prompted him to try harder, succeeding the second time around, pressing his lips hard against hers, making his friends jeer with delight.

She'd never met some of those boys before, and one of them, a short, stocky, blond one, wrapped a towel around his head, and said, "Now, this must be...uh...*Tallie*..."

Natalie nodded. "Yep, that's right," she said, sensing her cheeks warm.

The boy, as country as anyone she'd ever seen, did some old-fashioned bow, and said, "Jake...nice to meet you..."

He then patted Brandon on the back and said, "This boy talks about you all the time...ain't that right, Brandon?"

Brandon looked embarrassed, but his friends loved it, as if they always got a kick out of getting under his skin.

She looked up at him. "Well, that's good to hear."

Brandon introduced her to the rest of his soccer friends, and they nodded in her direction, and when he was done packing up his things, he offered to give her a ride back to her apartment, she, who had taken the bus.

"Nah," she sighed. "I'd rather go back to your place..."

"So," she began with a sigh, as they sat on his bed together.

He looked at her. "So...what?"

"You want to tell me?"

“Tell you what?”
“About my birthday...”
“Oh sure,” he said, reaching for a pillow to rest his arms on. “It’s on Saturday...”
“Good job,” she said. “But you know what I want.”
“Tallie, I’m not telling you,” he said. “Get over it...”
“Why won’t you? You tell me everything else...”
“Because if I tell you this, then all the mystery in our relationship will be gone,” he said jokingly.
“*Brandy*,” she whined, flopping on her back.
“Natalie, you can say my name like that all that you want to, but I’m still not telling,” he said. “And Scott and Asha better not have told you anything either...I’ve sworn them to secrecy...”
He extended his body and laid with her.
“We’re friends, we should *never* keep secrets from each other,” she said.
“Yes, we are,” he told her. “But stop being a baby and let me surprise you...”
“Will I even like it?”
“What do you mean ‘Will you like it’? Of course you will...I know you a little better than you think...”
“Okay, so I’ll like it,” she said with a sigh. “Will I really like it?”
“Natalie, I’m not about to do this with you...”
“Indulge me, please...”
“I refuse to...”
“Well, then get off this bed,” she said. “I refuse to lay with you...”
“That wouldn’t be the first time,” he joked, allowing her to shove him.

“Go take a shower,” she demanded, kicking him with her feet.
“Will you stop it? I was just about to go...”
“Good...”
“Are you comfortable being in here while I do that?”
“Probably not...”
“I thought so,” he said, rolling his eyes. “So, why don’t you go in the living room and wait till I get done?”
“Sounds like a good idea...”
She walked back into the living room, flicked on the television and heard Brandon start the shower in the next room.
They should go eat, shouldn’t they? She’ll pay this time, and she can do her homework over here. No, maybe it was best that she did it at her own apartment. Yes, that was a much better idea. She would be less distracted there. She would simply call Brandon before she went to bed.
Scotty joined them when he came home from working as the rush hour DJ on the school’s radio station. The three of them climbed into Scotty’s black Tahoe and headed to a sub place on the east side. And when they returned, they retired to the couch and she’d passed out in his lap after the third or fourth rerun of *Friends* took her under.
He gently shook her awake, and she knew almost instantly what the context of the conversation would be.
“I’ll drive you home in the morning,” he offered. “Just in time for your first class.”
No, no. She should go home. And she hadn’t even started her reading. She stopped herself at thinking about how great it would feel to lie there next to him, fall asleep with the moonlight, and his soft breathing.
He looked disappointed when she refused him. But she was doing the right thing, in spite of feeling guilty for making

him drive her back to her apartment, when he had to get up early for class the next day.

He pulled up in front of her complex and she sighed.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He only nodded, made some strange noise and looked out of his window.

She leaned over and kissed the side of his face, lingeringly, and whispered, “Will I see you tomorrow?”

He shrugged his shoulders, keeping his eyes focused ahead of him, and murmured, “I guess...”

She got out of the car, shut the door behind her and hoped that he’d make the routine phone call before he went to sleep.

But he didn't call her. And she went to bed confused.

She didn't see him the next day either.

She only got a phone call from him sometime after lunch saying that he was way too busy and had some sort of test to study for.

Of course, he'd never mentioned this test to her before.

But in her attempt to brush it off as her own stupidity, she called Asha when she got home from her classes, to see if she'd like to do something that night. After all, she didn't have any classes on Friday and it would be the perfect opportunity for her to catch up with her friend.

“I can't,” Asha sighed. “I have to stay in the library all night until I get this homework done...of course, I waited till the last minute to do it, and the shit just piled up on me...I'm sorry...”

She called Scotty to see if he wanted to catch the movie that he'd been dying to see.

“Sorry, babe, no can do,” he told her. “I have to work a double shift at the radio station tonight...I won't get home till late.”

The poor girl went to bed that night feeling pitiful.

But it was just one night. She could deal with one night.

She would simply lay in her bed in her favorite pajamas and watch her favorite sitcom till she passed out. She wouldn't even wait up for Brandon's phone call.

Brandon had been slacking lately and she'd give him a piece of her mind when she woke up the next morning. How dare he get upset over something so minuscule?

. . .

Brandon called the following morning. She was waiting for her moment to let all of her frustrations spew. But before she could get a word in, he said, “Pack a bag,” and hung up the phone.

And, without thinking, she began packing light. She wasn't sure what she had ahead of her, or what Brandon had planned at all, but her heart pounded all the while, and even in the silence of her bedroom with no one looking, she tried to mask her excitement, tried to play it cool. She showered, washed her hair, and put on her clothes with just minutes to spare before Brandon was calling again, ordering her to meet him in the parking lot. She took her small duffel, tossed it over her shoulder, grabbed her keys and was out the door.

She felt her stomach fall, seeing Brandon standing in front of his car, still running, with a single red rose and a cheesy grin on his face.

She approached him, folding her arms and tapping her foot, the way her mother used to do with her father when he'd done something stupid.

If Brandon didn't smell so nice then, she would have probably harmed him in some way. He shoved the rose at her, chuckled and said, "Happy Birthday, baby!"

She took it from him slowly, and sighed.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I suppose that you are forgiven..."

"As I hoped I would be," he told her, reaching for her bag. "Get in this car..."

"Do I have to? Where are we going?"

"You're not a big fan of surprises, are you?"

"I have my reasons," she said, watching him open the passenger door.

"*Tallie...baby,*" he began, reaching for her hand. "It's not a booby trap...it's my car...you love my car..."

"Not the way it smells..."

"Stay on task, please, stay on task..."

"Sorry," she said. "Fine, I'll go...I'm interested to see what y'all have been keeping from me for the past week..."

And Brandon drove, that sunny, breezy Friday morning, and the poor girl sat back, attempted to be calm, attempted to breathe, stealthily searched the car for any clues, for any sign, while Brandon sang his heart out to an alternative group that she didn't recognize.

"Stop looking around," he said, keeping his eyes on the road.

Natalie gasped, smiled and her cheeks warmed. "I wasn't looking at anything."

"Oh, don't you lie," he said. "Me singing doesn't make me blind, you know..."

"Well, that's funny because, it makes me deaf," she laughed; attempting to move as his hand tickled her thigh.

"You'll find out in good time," he told her. "It might not be anything...it could be a cruel joke that I'm playing on you..."

"I hope not..."

"You won't know, will you? Just try breathing, okay?"

She's tried that already. She's tried that and failed. So, she opted to reach for his hand, and he squeezed it in return. As if he knew that she were being completely paranoid and needed to calm down. She loved that about him. She loved that he calmed her down.

She wondered how she got to be so lucky the moment that Brandon pulled into the rock-laden driveway of a wood cabin that sat on the bank of Hartwell Lake, where the Savannah River flushed through, sitting placidly on the border of sweet Georgia and South Carolina, where the leaves of lofty birches and maples appeared to be set ablaze, fencing in deep blue waters with small, sun-smearing waves, and the occasional dinghy, bobbing in the wind.

"We're here," Brandon sighed, looking at her.

She was speechless, of course, plumb speechless! She managed to get out of the car and stand on two feet, but her knees buckled a little.

She attempted to wrap her mind around it all. Brandon seemed to be too calm about the whole scenario, as though such a minute gesture of affection was a catalyst to a greater realm between them.

This gesture, of course, almost completely eclipsed her bottle of cologne and dinner for his twenty-third birthday.

“Well, just don’t stand there with your mouth hanging open,” Brandon said to her, pulling her out of her trance. “Come inside and pick your bed...”

She trailed behind Brandon, who carried both of their bags, up to the arch head brown door, watching him reach into his pocket for a set of keys. He unlocked the door with ease, saying, “Here we go.”

Lord, she nearly fell over and died when Scotty and Asha jumped out from obscure locations in the den to spray her with silly string, and laugh at her. She waited for the moment when someone assured her that she deserved all of this.

While Brandon helped her get the silly string out of her hair, she asked, “How?”

“We all came down last night,” Scotty said. “That’s why we couldn’t do anything with you...Brandon drove back to Athens this morning to get you...”

“We wanted to make sure everything was set up right,” Asha said.

“Yea, it smelled pretty bad in here when we first came,” Scotty laughed. “So please excuse all of the Glade Plug-ins that you see...”

“And make sure that you thank Brandon appropriately,” Asha said. “It was his idea, his money, et cetera, et cetera...”

Oh, Natalie, don’t you do it! Don’t you dare start to cry!

But, she did anyway. And they all hugged her.

...

Upon sunset, after they’d unloaded their things, and designated sleeping arrangements, they hopped into Brandon’s truck, and headed into Hartwell, where they bought groceries to make dinner with, and the boys bought enough beer to give to an army. Natalie only shook her head. They returned to the cabin sometime after nightfall, and Natalie started the gas stove and rumbled through the cabinets in search of the right pan for her pork chops.

Brandon, Scotty and Asha argued over how to start a fire in the stone-lined fireplace in the narrow living room.

“Brandon, give me the matches before you burn down the cabin,” Asha demanded, snatching the packet from his hands.

“Brandon, don’t let her have them,” Scotty said, snatching the packet from her. “That girl is dangerous...”

“Am not,” Asha said defensively. “I am perfectly capable of creating a fire...”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Natalie added, turning the dial on the stove, watching the burner set ablaze.

“Nat, what are you talking about?” Asha said. “You’re supposed to be on my side...”

“I stand neutral,” she chuckled. “Because you can’t start a fire without...*wood*...”

“Wow,” Brandon started, getting to his feet. “I know I started dating her for a reason...”

Natalie smiled.

“Well, aren’t you just *pleased* with yourself?” Scotty said.

“Just stating the obvious,” Natalie replied, taking the pork loins from their packaging. “And while I’m cooking, maybe one of you would like to go and find some wood to put in the fireplace...”

Brandon, Scotty and Asha looked at each other.

“Well, I’m not cold anymore,” Asha began with a heavy sigh. “What about you guys?”

“Yea, I felt this sudden blast of warmth come over me,” Scotty chuckled.

“You two are the *laziest*,” Brandon said, rolling his eyes. “I’ll go get some wood...”

Natalie turned off the burner and sighed. “Hmm, I’ll go with you...”

Brandon looked pleased, and he extended his hand for her to grab.

They headed out the front door and into the fresh air.

“Thank you for walking with me,” he whispered down to her, squeezing her hand a little tighter.

She nodded and her head found his shoulder blade.

“They’ve been driving me a little crazy the past couple of nights,” he admitted quietly with a chuckle. “I don’t know if they were more concerned about making your birthday special or with each other...”

“You sense it too?” she asked him, watching him lower his head toward the ground.

“Are you kidding me? All they did yesterday was argue about this and argue about that...*what* Asha should write on your birthday cake...*how* Scotty should wrap your birthday present...*which* bedroom they should sleep in...I swear, I’ve never been happier to see you...”

Likewise, she wanted to say. But it didn’t come out.

She only let him lead her into the woods, with the moon watching overhead, the crickets crying in the distance and the faint current brushing against the bank. She held close to his hand, and brushed her brown, warmed cheek against his black jacket.

Brandon leaned down to pick up a few puny twigs stuck to moistened fallen leaves, and he sighed. “This is not going to build a fire...”

“No kidding,” Natalie agreed, squeezing his hand tighter. “I wish there was an axe around here or something...”

“What for? It’s not like any of us can chop wood...”

Natalie looked at him. “Speak for yourself...”

“*You* can chop wood?”

“Maybe...maybe my granddaddy taught me...”

“Are you kidding?”

“Nope,” she said. “My granddaddy Joe was the outdoorsy type. He’s the only man that I didn’t mind getting dirty with. I’d help him rake leaves and he’d give me a little money for it...and when I was about twelve, he taught me how to chop wood...”

“You surprise me more and more each day,” he chuckled. “So, you’re telling me that if I found an axe around here, you could chop up some wood for us?”

“Well, yea,” she said with a shrug. “I think I could get the job done...but I don’t see any stumps or anything...”

“Maybe you should wear the pants in this relationship from now on,” he teased, nudging her with his elbow.

“Oh, don’t be overdramatic, Brandy,” she said with a wave of her hand and the roll of her eye. “I’m wimpy with everything else...”

“How can I be so sure?”

She turned to face him, reached for the collar of his jacket, and pulled him into her.

“Shut up,” she whispered to his lips, leaving a kiss against them.

Yes, being alone with Brandon, beneath a shadowed red-leafed oak, and the moon watching overhead, made her feel that the world was just as it should be.

They settled in front of a fireless fireplace following dinner, beneath a set of four blankets, that Asha brought from the apartment back in Athens. Brandon popped a cap on a bottle of Heineken, looking at Natalie as she sat on the wooden floor, curled up with Asha, beneath a patchwork quilt and a wool blanket.

“Brandon’s got taste, I must say,” Asha commented, raising her head from its place on Natalie’s shoulder. “How’d you come up with this place, Bran?”

Brandon shrugged his shoulders and took a long swig from his bottle before answering.

“I just looked it up,” he said quietly, keeping his eyes focused on the brown glass before him. “It just looked really nice...and Tallie deserves something nice...”

Natalie met his eyes. She peacefully mouthed *Thank You* in his direction as she tugged on her quilt a little. He nodded in return.

“How rude,” Asha began, looking in Scotty’s direction. “How dare you not offer me a beer...?”

“I didn’t see you put any money up for some,” Scotty interjected, popping the cap on his second bottle. “And we don’t supply alcohol to minors.”

“I’ll be twenty-one in two weeks,” Asha defended. “I might as well start the celebration now...”

“I’m not sure I want to see what alcohol would do to you,” Scotty said. “And the last time that I checked, we were here to

celebrate Nat’s birthday...you can’t stand to let anyone else have the spotlight, can you?”

“Oh, God, here you guys go again,” Brandon said lowly, rolling his eyes.

“What are you trying to say, Scott? Of *course* I can...it’s Natalie’s *twentieth* birthday...of course I’m here to celebrate her birthday! All I wanted was a bottle of beer...”

“Why, Ash? So you can be even more annoying than you already are?”

“Take that back, you skinny bastard...”

“What for? You know it’s true...”

Asha then looked at Natalie. “You know, this cheap son of a bitch wasn’t going to put any money forth for your present, but I made him...I made him for being a cheap, country bastard...”

“Not all of us get our money from our rich daddies, now do we, Asha Castile?”

“Great, now you have *two* things to take back,” Asha said, folding her arms.

“You know that I’m not going to do it, so why don’t you just hush,” Scotty said. “Could you do that for me, Ash? Could you hush for once?”

“I won’t,” Asha said. “I won’t ever shut up...cheap bastard...”

“Why don’t you *both* try shutting up for once?” Natalie said. “It would do you both good, I think...”

“I will if *she* will,” Scotty mumbled.

“She will,” Natalie assured him. “*If* you give her a bottle of beer...”

Asha smiled in Scotty’s direction, appearing pleased with herself and the outcome.

Scotty hesitated for a moment, rolled his eyes, and said, "Alright, alright...they're in the fridge...keep in mind that I'm only doing it because it's Nat's birthday..."

"And it's almost midnight," Brandon reminded them, looking at the clock on his cellular phone. "I say we all drink to that..."

Natalie's eyes widened in his direction as he winked at her. "Brandon!"

"Baby, I've seen it in your eyes," he told her with a teasing laugh. "You want to try it..."

"No I don't," she said, folding her arms. "You've seen nothing..."

Brandon held up his bottle to his eye level, jiggling the bottle gently. "Look, baby, I only have a swallow left...you can have this..."

"Oh, great," Natalie began. "So, I can have your backwash as my first drink..."

"Glad you said that, Nat," Scotty said. "There's a brand new bottle waiting for you in the kitchen..."

"An even better idea," Brandon agreed. "I knew you were my best friend for a reason..."

Brandon and Scotty looked at each other and laughed.

"Nat, you don't have to drink anything that you don't want to drink," Asha said, rejoining them on the floor. "Don't succumb to peer pressure..."

"Thank you, Asha," Natalie said with a nod of her head.

"There you go, *flapping* your big lips again," Scotty said.

"Oh, don't give me that crap, Scotty," Asha told him. "I'm simply doing my job by suggesting that she not drink if she doesn't want to..."

"Why don't you allow her to make that decision for herself?"

"She already has, you dummy," Asha sneered. "I was just supporting her decision..."

"I have a proposition," Natalie voiced quietly, raising one, delicate finger.

"Yes?" Brandon answered.

"If I drink a whole bottle of beer, then Asha and Scotty have to stop arguing," she suggested with a grin.

Brandon nodded, and they both watched their friends look at each other.

"*And,*" Brandon continued. "You both have to kiss each other...and *mean* it..."

"Hell no," Asha exclaimed. "I refuse to agree to those terms! When the hell did this become Truth or Dare?"

"Wait a minute, Ash," Scotty began, waving his hand in her direction. "I see the game that Brandon's trying to play... but I'll up the ante a little..."

"By all means," Brandon encouraged.

Brandon raised himself from his position across the living room from Natalie, and he planted himself beside her, gingerly placing an arm across her chest, reeling her into him. When they both got settled again, Scotty cleared his throat and continued.

"I'll kiss that dragon, if Natalie agrees to chugging the beer..."

"No," Brandon answered hastily before Natalie could even part her lips. "She'll get sick...it's her first drink, man...have a little consideration..."

"Fine, fine," Scotty said, rolling her eyes. "Natalie will drink the beer...cautiously...and she will be an active participant in *10 Fingers*..."

"Scotland Lee Kelly, you devious, devious man," Asha said, smiling at him. "I think I love you all of a sudden..."

“That’s not fair either, and you know it,” Brandon argued. “This girl hasn’t done anything...she’s like a peach that’s never been bruised...”

“Nice analogy, Bran,” Asha laughed.

“Why thank you,” he replied. “I try...”

“Back to the topic at hand, please?” Scotty pressed.

“Maybe Nat’s not as innocent as she seems...maybe she’s got secrets that she’s never told you...”

Natalie looked at her boyfriend - his face descended a bit.

“I highly doubt that,” Brandon replied, shrugging off his friend’s suggestions.

“Isn’t this a drinking game?” Asha said.

“That’s how I’ve played it,” Scotty said.

“Me too,” Brandon agreed.

“Look,” Scotty began, getting to his feet and heading in the direction of the kitchen. “Since Natalie’s never done anything, you won’t have to worry about her drinking much...”

Natalie watched Brandon take a deep breath, and she reached up, rubbed his hand for comfort and sighed as well.

Scotty reappeared in the living room, with four wet bottles of the Heineken, passing it to each of the occupants in the room.

“Alright,” Scotty said with a strong exhale. “Are we ready?”

“Wait a second,” Natalie said. “You two need to get to kissin’...”

Brandon chuckled, squeezed at his girlfriend’s shoulder and replied, “I agree completely...I hope you remembered to brush your teeth...”

“Brandon Greene, you do realize that I’ll get you back for this one, right?” Asha snorted.

“Hmm,” Brandon began, placing a finger to the cleft in his chin. “Delivering idle threats means that you use tongue...and Natalie and I will tell you when to stop...”

“You’re just making it worse for yourself, aren’t you?” Asha told him.

“Ash, just shut up and get to kissin’...” Natalie cut in with a grin upon her face.

“I think I love to hear you say that,” Brandon said.

“Why thank you...”

Brandon and Natalie watched as Scotty chugged the rest of his beer, before hesitantly pressing his pink lips against Asha’s slowly. The connection was awkward initially. But they eventually melded into each other, and she could have sworn that she heard heavy breathing.

“Alright, alright,” Brandon said. “I think I’ve seen enough...let’s get this game going, shall we?”

“I’m not so sure that I want to know everything that you’ve done,” Natalie told Brandon, turning her head backward to look up at him.

“I’m not sure I want you to know either,” Brandon replied, attempting a smile in her direction. “Drink up!”

“That was by far the worst kiss I’ve ever experienced,” Asha said, wiping her mouth. “That moment only justified why I don’t date white guys in the first place...”

“Or *any* guys for that matter,” Scotty retorted, wiping his mouth, and then cracking open another bottle. “Now I must drown my sorrows in this drink...”

“Looks like we held up our end of the deal,” Asha said, folding her arms. “Now, it’s Nat’s turn. Crack open that bottle and have a drink, young lady...”

She gave the bottle to Brandon, watched as he opened it for her, and as he handed it back to her, he encouraged her to drink slowly.

The game commenced, and four sets of ten fingers were each accounted for, and Asha began with the statement, “Never have I ever had sex...”

That was an easy one. Scotty, Asha and Brandon all lowered a single finger, signifying that yes, they’d each have sex before, and each took a three-second sip of their beers.

Natalie’s ten fingers were still accounted for and she took a deep breath as her friends all nervously laughed at each other.

Then, Scotty’s turn came. “Never have I ever...given or received oral sex...”

Another easy one for Natalie, while she again watched Asha, Scotty and her sweet, not-so-innocent Brandon lower another finger and take another drink.

“I’d like to know *who*, Asha Castile,” Natalie pressed, her eyes widened. “And whether or not there was an...*even trade*...”

Natalie watched as her friend’s cheeks reddened, and she lowered her head, laughed, and replied meekly, “I played on both teams [the boys cackled and jeered at this]...and it was a guy that you don’t know...”

“Thank you for telling me...”

“Oh, Lord, I wanted to forget it as soon as I’d done it!”

Some few rounds later, Natalie had discovered some things about Asha and Scotty that she was sure that she never wanted to know.

She’d heard enough about licking this and sucking that to last her a lifetime, as well as enough about Brandon to keep her from ever wanting to spend the night with him.

She was sure that he sensed it too.

And Asha, having downed her fourth beer in a matter of thirty minutes, was beginning to show the effects upon her face, and in her comical giggling.

Moreover she was touching Scotty more than she normally would have.

She was only left with three fingers. Scotty with two and Brandon with one.

Sweet Natalie stood tall with eight whole fingers and only one-and-a-half bottles of beer consumed.

“Okay, okay, my turn,” Scotty said, attempting to compose himself from laughing at Asha. “Never have I ever...gotten a tattoo...”

“Yes! I’m still in the game!” Brandon said.

“Me too...” Asha chimed in. “No tattoos...”

“Me neither...” Scotty said.

Natalie hesitantly reached for her beer bottle.

She watched as each of her friends fell silent temporarily, and it looked as though they were trying to catch their breath.

She was seventeen, bizarrely absent-minded, and she’d overheard Sidney and her friends talking about it in her sister’s room next door, and she’d wanted to join. Oh, what her mama would do if she knew that her daughter had a tiny white lily inked somewhere on her brown skin, hidden in warmth and shadow.

Natalie lowered a finger.

“Really? A tattoo?” Scotty asked, as a slow grin of curiosity formed on his face.

“I can’t believe it!” Asha said. “My baby has a wild streak! When? Where?”

“I was seventeen...in a tattoo parlor in Decatur...I can’t tell you where it is...”

“Can you at least tell me *what* it is?” Asha asked.

“A white lily...”

“I’m not sure if I feel betrayed...or turned on...” Brandon said.

“Why won’t you tell us where it is?” Scotty asked.

She didn’t want to sound completely trite in saying that she was saving that for her husband, in spite of her stupidity.

So, she opted for a simpler phrase: “It’s just between me and the Lord...”

“Did it hurt?” Asha asked.

Natalie shrugged. “Not really...there’s a lot of...*flesh*...um...where the tattoo is...”

Brandon cracked open another bottle of beer, and said, “Natalie...just stop talking about your tattoo...”

She looked at her boyfriend, internally laughing at his nervousness.

“Aw, is she making you squirm?” Asha prodded him with a teasing smile.

Brandon took a long swig from his bottle, swallowed hard, and said, “Shut up, Asha...”

Asha and Scotty, who’d allowed alcohol to make them quite a chuckling pair, laughed at Asha’s joke, as they fell all over each other.

“Well,” Scotty began, taking a sip from his own bottle. “I’d say after that little surprise, we could stop playing...I don’t think we need to know anything else about anyone...”

“Yes, I agree,” Natalie said. “Especially from those who you are in a relationship with.”

Brandon looked at her.

She wasn’t sure how many bottles of beer she’d consumed following the game, while the foursome laid on the wooden floor with the itchy oriental rug in the middle, while she lay on

Brandon’s chest as he sloppily stroked her head, grazing his lips across the top of it.

She felt his chest move up and down slowly.

But she recognized her inebriation the moment that Scotty suggested that they all jump off of the dock outside of the house sometime in the middle of the night, and she was the first to accept the offer. She leapt off of her boyfriend, pulled him by his hands and headed toward the front door.

“Baby,” Brandon called after her, laughing. “Baby, slow down...baby...*Tallie*...you’ll make yourself sick...baby!”

But she didn’t listen. She felt the moon kiss her skin, felt the night’s chill strike her cheeks, heard the crickets’ cry. The moon created a path of white light, and it smeared the black water, and the branches from the trees high above their heads created black shadows against its milky surface.

And she grabbed Brandon’s waist for warmth, allowing him to kiss her forehead again. They were completely unaware of the fact that Scotty and Asha were undressing as they enjoyed the view of the lake.

“What the hell?” Brandon asked, laughing at them the moment that he took notice. When Natalie tried to turn around and look, Brandon turned her head back toward the lake, telling her, “No, Baby, no...don’t look...there are some things that I don’t think you’re ready to see yet...Asha...are you crazy? Put your clothes back on...do you think I want to see those? Wait, wait a minute...I *do* want to see those...Asha, put those away! And definitely put *that* away....”

“Bran, I know you love me,” Asha said, standing naked. “But this is something that I have to do...and don’t act like you’ve never seen any of this before...you’re a pro...*apparently*...”

“Not in front of the girlfriend, please...she already thinks bad of me...”

She hardly did. Ha, if anything, she felt bad about not telling him about the tattoo or about tongue-kissing Kenny Pierce in high school.

For some strange reason she felt that she owed him every explanation.

He kissed her forehead again, and they watched as Scotty and Asha, naked and free, ran the length of the dock, leaving them on the bank, holding hands as they leapt into the water.

“Oh, my God,” Brandon chuckled. “I can’t believe that they just did that...”

“Sadly, I can,” Natalie said.

“Want to join them?”

Natalie sighed.

She tugged on the Bulldogs pullover that she’d stolen from Brandon’s bag earlier, pulled it over her head, and exhaled.

She pulled out the bow that held her hair in a ponytail, kicked off her sneakers and said, “Yes, I think I would...”

She would like to thank the alcohol for giving her enough courage to throw her silly behind in that black water.

Well, after she pushed Brandon in, with his sneakers still on his feet.

When he reached the surface, he coughed, laughed and said, “That wasn’t very nice...”

“Not feeling very *nice* at the moment...”

“Well get your beautiful ass in this water before I come up there and get you...”

She jumped in, bobbed slowly to the surface, and she looked up toward the sky, as Brandon’s hands found her body, pulling her close. She saw the stars, saw the moon, and as Brandon’s lips found her neck, she was almost certain that if she ex-

tended her hand, she could touch it, and it would awaken every dull nerve inside of her.

She kissed Brandon, while Scotty and Asha played...and she meant it.

She was almost sure that she’d never meant anything more than kissing him.

And she almost said it then. The moment that they pulled apart and the moon filled his blue eyes, she almost vocally admitted to him that she loved him.

To the point that it hurt.

But, she bit her tongue.

Then, she wrapped her arms around his neck, and his wet lips kissed her shoulder blade.

“Happy Birthday,” he whispered against the base of her neck.

“Thank you,” she replied.

Scotty and Asha retired almost an hour later, gathering their clothes in their arms, bidding them goodnight and Natalie a *Happy Birthday*, before heading back into the house, and shutting the door behind them.

Brandon and Natalie sat soaking wet on the edge of the dock, swinging their dangling feet, while she held onto his arm and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I think I’m still drunk,” Natalie giggled.

“Well, it doesn’t go away as quickly as you might think,” he replied. “See...I told you we’d get drunk together one day, didn’t I?”

“You did, didn’t you? Well, aren’t you smart? Was that a year ago?”

Brandon pursed his lips. “Yes, I think it was...”

“Did you ever think that we’d be here in this moment, like this?” Natalie asked him, looking toward the sky.

“I think I prayed for it every night...”

“Don’t mock me on my birthday, Brandy,” she said, raising her head to look at him.

“I wasn’t,” he whispered, kissing her lips once.

“Well,” Natalie began with a sigh. “I sure didn’t think so... I was hoping to get rid of you come springtime...”

“And think about how empty your life would’ve been...”

His forehead found hers.

“I try not to think about it,” she whispered.

“I’m not the mushy type, Chandler,” he said. “I’m the arguer, remember? I’m the worst boyfriend that ever existed...”

“You were with a crappy girlfriend, Greene,” she replied. “So you had no choice but to be a crappy boyfriend...”

“I guess I’ll take your word for it...I just hate that you had to hear all that bad stuff about me...”

“Brandon, don’t act like we weren’t friends before all of this,” she told him, rolling her eyes. “God help me, I know all of your secrets. Sure it’s a lot to stomach now...but from now on, how about we just don’t think about her or that...s-tuff...you did with her...it’s you and me now...”

“I like what alcohol does to you, Chandler,” Brandon said, smiling.

“Well,” Natalie began, returning her head to its place on his shoulder blade. “Don’t get used to it, my darling...”

They returned to the house an hour later, changed into dry clothes, and stood awkwardly in the hallway by the two bedrooms in the back of the shadowed, quiet house.

“Not really excited about sharing the bed with a dude,” Brandon whispered.

They laughed and she reached for his hand slowly, taking a deep breath. “You don’t have to...”

She watched his face light up to the possibility. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying...?”

“Go in there and kick Scotty out of my sleeping place,” Natalie whispered with a smile.

There would be no need. Brandon opened the bedroom door, expecting Scotty to be sleeping placidly, but he was nowhere to be found.

While Natalie covered her mouth, attempting to hold back embarrassed laughter, Brandon patted her back, and said, “Go wait in my room, baby...I’m not sure that I want you to see this...”

She wasn’t sure that she wanted to see it either, so she did as Brandon suggested. She got settled into the full-sized bed with a white bed frame and pastel linens. Less than five minutes later, Brandon crept back into the room, laughing under his breath.

Natalie sat up, hugged the covers close to her body, and whispered, “What? What is it?”

Brandon kept quiet until he climbed into the bed next to her, and pulled the up to his chest. “Take a wild guess,” he whispered.

“Bran, they aren’t...you know...are they?”

Brandon nodded. “They didn’t even notice that I came in there...”

“Oh...my...God...”

“Don’t worry, Tal,” he assured her. “They won’t remember this in the morning...and for their sakes I *hope* that they don’t...”

“I can’t believe Asha,” Natalie said, lying back down.

“Oh, baby,” he whispered, lowering himself down next to her. “Don’t worry about it...”

She wanted to believe him.

“Damn it,” he said.

“What?”

“I almost forgot...”

He sat up, swung his feet to the floor, and reached out for his duffle bag, sitting on an armchair in the corner of the room. He dug through it for several seconds before retrieving what he was searching for.

“Bran, what are you doing?”

“I almost forgot your birthday present...”

“Brandon...”

He handed her a square blue box, with a white bow wrapped around the center and sighed, “I hope you like it...”

“Brandon, you didn’t have to...if you spent more than twenty dollars on me...”

“Shut up, and open the damn thing...”

She unraveled the ribbon, and hesitantly cracked it open.

She gasped. Inside was a diamond dragonfly pendant on a long platinum chain. When she rolled her eyes close slowly, a tear escaped, ran the length of her cheek before she looked back up at him.

“You didn’t have to. You *know* you didn’t have to...”

He nodded and grinned. “Hell, of course...”

“Why on earth did you do it?”

“Baby, do you really have to ask?”

“You spent too much, Brandon...”

“I spent what I thought was appropriate for your twentieth birthday...”

“How much did you spend?”

“Don’t ask me that question,” he told her. “There is never a limit to what I’d do for you, Natalie...never a limit...remember that...just shut up, kiss me and enjoy it...”

So, she did. And another tear fell.

And after she set her present aside, they laid down together, and as she held his face, she allowed him to kiss her... deep, and strong, and hard kisses...and she ran her fingers through his hair slowly, as his fingers coursed along the skin of her stomach and her waist and the protruding bone and curve in her hips. And she allowed his tongue to dart past her lips and invade her mouth in a way that she wouldn't let it before.

And she paused for a moment...yes, she paused for a moment and she took his hand...and after kissing each finger...slowly, meaningfully...she guided his hand to a place where she allowed him to touch her...and he knew exactly what he was doing, didn't he? Yes...oh, Lord...oh, Lord, yes...everything felt right...everything that he was doing was just...was just... was just right...she would not feel guilty for this moment...she would only settle into this feeling...hope that it would last longer...and she would pray...yes...she would pray for the moment that she could breathe again...

An hour later, she watched him as he slept. She watched him inhale and exhale, and inhale and exhale again. She watched shadows dance about his face and as she extended her fingers toward it, pushing his hair away, she leaned into him, kissed the warm skin of his forehead, inhaled deeply, smelled his proximity and breathed, “I love you...”

Chapter 9

THE BLUE BOX



SHE KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN.

She'd crawled into his bed one hot night and his kisses had created a snowball effect. Before she could catch her breath, he was pulling his shirt over his head, she was kissing at the nape of his neck as she tugged at the brim of his pajama bottoms. They were wrapped in his navy blue sheets like a cocoon as the heat rose between them. She'd managed to pull his pajama bottoms down enough to where she daintily lay a hand on the side of his buttock.

Then, he stopped her.

They sat motionless for a moment, panting in the darkness.

Then, she whispered, "Maybe...maybe I should leave..."

He nodded slowly. "Yea, I think you should."

Lying next to Brandon Greene each night became decreasingly easy. Kissing him had become a dangerous game, and she was certain that his body ached for more just as much as hers did. This trend had been in development in the weeks leading up to their one-year anniversary. She'd fall victim to the way his eyes looked in shadowed moonlight, and soon after, they'd get so hot, so heavy, so ready, so quickly that one of them had to stop the other. But he never asked her for more, as much as his eyes gave him away. He'd only sigh, roll over on his back, stare at the ceiling and apologize. Part of her knew that it angered him that he couldn't have her. On those particular nights, after she'd stop from going any further, he'd excuse himself to the bathroom, without saying a word. He'd stay in there for several minutes and run a faucet.

She'd then miss the days where lying next to Brandon didn't give her such grief. Heck, lying next to a two hundred pound, six-foot-four twenty-four-year-old always seemed to make her feel safe. But that in itself came with exceptions. He had the tendency to roll on her, smashing her up against a poster of The Who on the wall. It always seemed to take her several minutes to muster up the strength that it took to push him off. In most desperate cases, she opted to use her feet, which were generally icy, causing him to wake up and curse at her for placing the frosty planes of her skin on his bare back. He most often stole the covers from her, leaving her small body freezing. And when she didn't feel like spending the several minutes that it took to get them back, she simply tickle him to retrieve them.

On special nights, he'd talk in his sleep. Sometimes, if she was lucky, she could have a conversation with him.

"Brandon...Brandon...Brandon..."

"Yes, Dolly?"

"What are you doing?"

"Playing with my monkey..."

"Do you like playing with your monkey?"

"Yes, Dolly, I do...I love playing with my monkey..."

"Tell your monkey I said 'Hello'..."

"Yes, Dolly, I will...and you tell Natalie that I said 'Hello'..."

"Dolly" was what he liked to call her most, but when she'd ask about the name in the morning, he'd simply shrug his

shoulders, smile and say, “It’s my secret girlfriend...I didn’t tell you about her?”

In a year’s time, she’d become the type of girl that she once hated. She was lovesick and meek, doe-eyed and heart-strung.

Brandon was around all of the time. He was the figure that ate potato chips in the spot that she’d just vacuumed; he was the man who stuck his incredibly smelly feet into her face after he’d just got done playing basketball; he was the one who’d pick at the chicken in the kitchen at dinner before she had a chance to serve it; he was the one who relentlessly picked on her accent; the one who asked her to wash his hair and give him a haircut every few weeks or so, because he was too lazy to go get it professionally done; he was the one whose driving was so terrible that each time she rode with him, she was sure that it would be her last ride [“Brandon Greene, slow down! Brandon Greene, the light is red...stop! Brandon Greene, you can’t take off like that on a gravel road!”].

Yes, Brandon Greene was the one who initiated wrestling matches between them for kicks; the one who’d surprised her with a drawer of her very own in his bedroom, where she could put her pajamas, her panties and her socks; he was the one whose hair always smelled like coconut because he knew that she liked it; who gave her back rubs when he felt that she needed them; the one whose pink lips she never grew tired of.

He loved to stand in the mirror at night before they went to bed and watch her do her hair. He’d stare at her as if he’d

never seen coarse hair like hers before. She’d brush it a little, making sure that there were no kinks and shortly following she’d tie her hair up with a thin silk black scarf. She knew that it completely fascinated him.

Sometimes he’d ask questions and sometimes he would just stare, grin slightly, and once she’d finished, he’d wrap his long arms around her small frame, the smell of his freshly-showered body consuming her nostrils, and he would kiss the side of her face, deeply, slowly. She’d close her eyes, and they’d stand still for several seconds.

Part of her felt that they’d been together for years.

The disparity between them never seemed to bother her anymore. He was simply Brandon, notably her best friend, who gave her more laughter and comfort than any sensation she’d ever known. He was a man, whose blue eyes she writhed under, whose touch was as relaxing and easy as rain on Sunday. Yes, when they were alone, nothing else mattered.

The polarity of his lightness to her darkness were at its greatest when they were in public. Where Brandon was, she was surely not far behind. And the stinging eyes of passersby seemed to only judge, scrutinize, affecting her in such a way that, on some occasions, she’d get so disgusted that she couldn’t look at him. They’d return to the house on Trent road, she, garnering the feeling that she had to get enough distance so that she could breathe. She knew that he’d give her time to just be alone. He’d allow her enough time to re-evaluate what he meant to her. And several minutes later, he’d

usually find her hiding place, most times by the pond, her eyes, tear-smearred and heavy, staring out toward the expanding ripples she'd made with a twig.

"I'm sorry," she'd say quietly, staring aimlessly. "It's so stupid..."

And he'd remain silent. He'd simply wrap his arms around her small body and kiss her temple.

...

They would go into Atlanta on a night in late May to celebrate their one-year anniversary. As Brandon showered, Natalie made up his bed, and she proceeded to pick up his clothes that were splayed about the room. In the midst of it, she rolled her eyes. She simultaneously suffered through an off-key rendition of "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You". Then she smiled.

Brandon's new thing was singing in the shower. She figured that he only did it because he knew that she hated hearing it.

"You sound like a bag of dogs being thrown against the wall," she'd commented an earlier day.

"Thank you, baby," he'd replied with a grand smile. "I thought you might like it..."

She'd bear it. Whatever made him smile, she'd accept. She reached down to pick up a black jacket that he'd worn the other day. As she carelessly tossed the garment over her arm, rolling her eyes at her boyfriend's sloppiness, something hit her

foot. Natalie cautiously knelt down, swallowed hard, and wrapped her fingers around a small blue box.

No, no, no, no!

As she stood erect, she felt a million thoughts pace through her head.

No, no, no, no, no!

She didn't want to open it.

But her curiosity prevailed as her heart began to race. She slowly cracked the box open.

A solitaire diamond ring was enclosed.

Natalie looked toward the closed bathroom door as Brandon sang. A wave of sickness fell over her.

She had to think rationally.

Yes, there was no denying that she loved Brandon dearly, but did he honestly believe that they could have a permanent future together? Could she roll over and look at his face every morning, smell those disgusting feet, kiss those same lips repeatedly? Yes, in an idealistic world, perhaps. They could exist as one in a world that accepted their visual discrepancy as much as they did.

Mama always referred to that world as "La-La Land".

She was only twenty.

What would her family think? Yes, she was certain that her family would simply be overjoyed that she brought home a white boy from New York, especially following their opposition to her even attending UGA at all.

Good thing that she proved them wrong!

No, no, no!

“Baby,” he called from the shower.

Natalie swallowed her apprehension and cleared her throat. “Yes?”

“You better not be cleaning...”

“I’m not...don’t worry,” she murmured.

“You’re quiet,” he called out. “And when you’re quiet, you’re up to something...”

She was silent in his green Explorer. Dead silent. She didn’t look at him. She couldn’t look at him. Everything in her God-given power told her that looking at him might make her crumble into a billion pieces. But, he was wearing that delicious cologne that she’d bought him for his twenty-fourth birthday last August.

Marrying Brandon...Being Married to Brandon...Ms. Brandon David Greene...Brandon and Natalie Greene?

She attempted the idea in her head.

The sound of it made her utterly numb.

Suddenly the magic of doodling her name next to her crush's name on notebook paper in the seventh grade now had a hazy grey cloud covering it. She didn’t want to rush to conclusions, didn’t want to assume, but was it not blatantly obvious what a ring like that was for?

“You’re quiet again,” he said in his low voice, as if he weren’t used to it already. He glanced over at her, they stopped at a light.

She cleared her throat. “I’m thinking...”

“About?”

“Have a test next week...can’t believe that I haven’t started studying for it.”

“Can’t believe it either...”

She sighed. He reached for her hand. Her entrails twisted.

“Now,” he began. “Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on?”

She suddenly loathed that he could guess her feelings so well.

“What? My professor’s a really tough grader.”

“You’ll make an A...”

“What if I don’t?”

“Tallie...” he murmured.

She squeezed his hand. She bit her lip back to resist the urge to reveal her discovery. She wouldn’t ruin the night, she wouldn’t let him worry. But she had to devise a way to let him down easily. She concluded that she couldn’t marry him now. And she wasn’t sure if she ever could.

“Fine,” he said. “I give up...let’s just have fun tonight shall we?”

She nodded.

She ordered the steak and he the tilapia, and as they each sipped a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, he couldn’t keep his eyes off of her, in that creepy type of way, as if he was up to something.

Her heart just kept on pounding. She found it hard to swallow in the moment, and was certain that, at any moment, the walls would start to cave in on her. Was it just her crazed imagination, or was everyone staring at them?

He replaced his glass on the table, cleared his throat and said, "Natalie, I have something to tell you..."

Quickly, that girl reacted, placed her hand on her boyfriend's, lifted her glass high and said, "Brandon, let's make a toast, shall we?"

He looked at her strangely. He had every right.

But what else was she supposed to do? She most certainly wasn't ready to hear what he had to tell her.

He complied, raised his glass as well, still glared at her in that weird, creepy, stomach-dropping sort of way.

"To us," she said. "May we stay this way...you know, just as we are, like this...today...dating...having fun...for a long time...you know, not forever...just a long time..."

He cleared his throat again, but this time, in that way when he felt uncomfortable.

"Fine," he said. "To us, and to the worst toast I've ever heard in my entire life..."

They clinked glasses. She finished off her glass.

"You forgot 'I love you'." he said to her.

"What?"

"You forgot to say, 'I love you, Brandon'."

She swallowed with difficulty. "I thought that that was understood?"

"Sometimes I want to hear it. God, I sound like such a girl."

She reached for the expensive bottle by the table's side. She poured another glass gingerly. She could see Brandon watching her closely.

She took a quick swig, and said, "I—I love you, Brandon...is that better?"

"I suppose," he said, with a shrug. "And I love you too... but can I tell you what I have to tell you now?"

Another swig passed her lips. She nodded.

"I ran into Sophia today..."

"Gee, what a great way to start a conversation...you've definitely got my attention..."

"Hear me out..."

"I'm all ears," she replied sarcastically, raising her glass to her lips.

Another swig..

"Tal..."

"Alright...go ahead..."

"I ran into Sophia today," he said. "And we hugged and..."

"Gee, great story..."

"And we hugged and I was looking at her, and I wondered why I ever fell in love with her in the first place...why I ever dealt with her..."

"Because she was extraordinarily beautiful...smart...successful...not a virgin..."

“Yes, all great things,” he said with a light chuckle. “But I was looking at her, and wondered how...you know, really thought about it...I wondered how my life was when you weren’t in it...”

Another swig...

“Is Brandon David Greene getting sappy on me?”

“Yes, I am, Natalie, pardon me...”

Another swig...

“By all means...c—c—continue...”

“Would it be totally clichéd to say that I’m glad that I have you in my life?”

“Oh, totally...”

“And that I don’t want to be anywhere else...?”

“Certainly...”

“And that I want to marry you?”

“Makes me want to...what?”

Another swig...a long swig...

“You heard me...”

“I’m not sure that I did...” She lowered her eyes, hiccuped and sloppily slammed her glass on the table.

“Oops,” she giggled. “Pardon me...”

“Natalie...are you drunk?”

She leaned back sloppily in her seat. “Possibly...”

People started to stare...of course they would...what a spectacle they were...

And why on earth was the candle starting to float?

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“That the wine was good...”

And it began to hit her hard...yes, that darn wine...and she started to laugh, really hard, as if she’d just heard the funniest joke...maybe she just did...Brandon Greene being ready for marriage was definitely cause for a good laugh.

“What the hell is funny? You getting drunk before we even get our dinner?”

She laughed harder, louder, hiccuped again and said, “No...no...of course not, Brandon Greene...my d—d—darling, my confused boyfriend...you wanting to marry me... that’s what’s funny...”

Brandon paused for a moment and dropped his eyes as he pursed his lips. It appeared as if he were contemplating his next move.

It wasn’t until she belched, giggled and slammed her hand on the table that he dumped his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back. He got to his feet, yes, her boyfriend of an entire year, came to her side of the table, and pulled her out of her chair.

And then they were out in the fresh air, Brandon tugging her ardently. She was still laughing...

Brandon was only a hazy figure ahead of her, and she found it incredibly difficult to stride. Her steps were more like a stagger, and through her inebriation, she sensed Brandon's progressing agitation with her. She then looked up toward the sky. She felt that she could reach for the moon again. There it was! Right at her fingertips! Part of her didn’t care; she’d said

no in the best way that she knew how. Another part of her hoped that she didn't hurt his feelings too much.

She concluded that he was still Brandon, still her best friend, one of the very few unwavering things in her humble life.

“Oh, big, bad, Brandon is mad,” she teased.

He got her into the car, got behind the driver's seat, and he started the engine. He didn't say a word to her.

And she still taunted him, took his arm and laughed in his face.

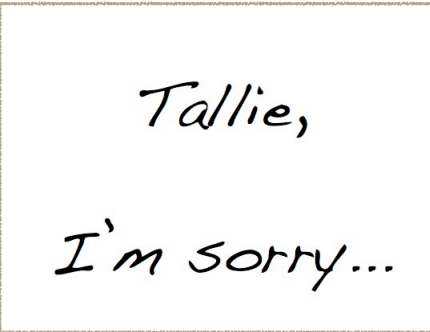
“How many guests would we have, Brandon? How many? What would be our first song? Sophia could be my maid of honor! What an excellent idea, right? Having your ex-girlfriend as my maid of honor! Then you could see her all of the time. Admit it, Brandon...admit it now! You still love her, don't you? You miss having sex with her, don't you? Admit it! Ooh! We could have “Ebony and Ivory” playing as I walk down the aisle. We could honeymoon in Europe. I'm sure your parents, whom I've never met by the way, would love paying for that. And I'm sure my mother, who's never supported interracial dating, would give me away to a white boy! Did I tell you that my family doesn't know you exist? Isn't that funny? I'm too scared to tell them! Isn't that the funniest thing you've ever heard?”

He kept his cool, even when they got back to the house on Trent Road, even when he lifted her up into his arms and she

still taunted him. She still taunted him when he got her into a pair of his shorts and an old t-shirt and got her into his bed.

But, as the sun spilled into the room several hours later, and she spent several moments trying to make out where she was and what had had happened, Brandon Greene was nowhere to be found...

The only thing left of him was a note.



Tallie,
I'm sorry...

Chapter 10

THE DANCE



WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HER?

She'd been working on her lab report in her bedroom, her door shut tightly, and she could hear Asha's loud music through the wall. She'd stormed out of her room, she'd busted into Asha's, and began snapping at her friend. It was something she'd never done before, and the idea that she'd been angry enough to do it unnerved her to the point that she fell to her knees and crumbled into a roar of tears. Her moment of total vulnerability served as her time of release, as a way of admittance. She realized then that in the month or so of Brandon's disappearance, he had taken a key piece of her, wherever he was.

She'd been so angry for days, disruptively and degradingly filled with so much hurt that it clouded her conscience, her senses, her thoughts.

The following night, she was at the dark house on Trent road on a chilly night in early fall, hugging her pea coat close to her body.

She'd banged on the door, loudly, obnoxiously and Scotty had answered with a wary looked glossed over his face.

"Natalie," he said. "What are you...?"

"I know you know where he is," she'd interrupted.

And he'd let her in. They sat on the couch together, and he quietly admitted to not knowing where Brandon had gone. He

admitted that the last time he'd seen Brandon was the same day of their one-year anniversary, and his dark-haired friend hadn't said much in the small pocket of time that they stood in the kitchen that day. Scotty apologized following, saying that he'd tried to call him a couple of times, but received no answer.

"It's just not like him," Scotty told her over two cups of water. "I mean, you and I both know better than anyone that he's done some crazy shit in his life, but nothing like this..."

She'd cried harder by that point, feeling the defeated once more, and Scotty instinctively covered her with his arms.

She couldn't say that she never tried calling him, nor could she necessarily blame him for wanting to leave her either.

She'd assumed that he'd finally had enough of her, knew that even though they'd tried, and even though she'd tried her hardest, her fears still prevailed, despite the fact that in the year that they were together, she couldn't have imagined loving him more, which would most definitely explain the reason why her emotions still got the best of her.

She would let Scotty hold her in hopes of finally letting him go.

...

She'd quit her job at the library towards the beginning of her senior year, and nabbed the part time job that she'd applied for at St. Mary's hospital, working as a secretary in the pediatric unit. She enjoyed being that close to children all of the time, loved peeking in on them when the doctors and nurses weren't around, and it inspired the content of the personal statement she'd written along with her application to the five schools she wanted to go to the most and had applied to the previous summer: Johns Hopkins, University of North Carolina, Duke, Wake Forest, and Harvard Medical. Writing the personal statement seemed easy. She'd always known why she wanted to be a doctor. Explaining it to a board of seasoned doctors and administrators didn't intimidate her one bit.

It was within the first few weeks or so that she'd been working there, on a spontaneous break for coffee in the cafeteria, that Anthony Jones, a resident, boldly admitted that he'd been watching her for weeks.

"So...you're the one I've seen lurking around the newborn unit, aren't you?"

"You caught me..."

"What's your name?"

"Natalie..."

"Do you like Caribbean, Natalie?"

She nodded, thinking of her father. "Yes..."

"Can I pick you up at eight then?"

She sighed, thinking of Brandon. "Why not...?"

She dressed comfortably that night, slipped on a pair of jeans and a black shirt that she stole from Asha once had never returned it. She wore her hair down, with its natural waviness, shockingly tamed and shiny.

Asha came into the room; lay against her bed, as she applied brown eyeliner to her narrow brown eyes. Jill Scott sang from her speakers.

"What's his name?" Asha asked in a teasing voice, ginning.

"I don't wish to say," Natalie told her, glancing back at her shortly.

"Why not?"

"Because, it's just dinner, it's not that big of a deal..."

"Is he cute?"

"That doesn't matter to me..."

"So, he's cute!" Asha rolled off of the bed, and stood behind Natalie in her vanity mirror.

Natalie, smiling, said, "I told you, Asha, it doesn't matter."

"Of course it does, you want him to be as cute as Brandon, or maybe more, so you'll get over him faster..."

"That doesn't matter...and I thought that we didn't mention that name in this apartment anymore?"

"Sorry, you're right," Asha told her. "And I'm right too..."

"Yes, Asha, in your own mind you are..."

“So...what’s his name?”

Natalie sighed, too nervous to argue with her friend, too anxious to care about being mysterious.

“Anthony...Anthony Jones...”

“Wow, he sounds sexy...Anthony and Natalie...has a ring to it...”

“Ash, stop it,” Natalie whined.

Asha only smiled. “What...too soon?”

“Yes, very much so...”

“Just have fun for me,” Asha told her, wrapping her arms around her friend. “I’m sick and tired of watching you wander around like a zombie...it’s been, what, three months now?”

Natalie sighed. “Something like that.”

“You gave him time and space, did you not? And think about what he did to you? [Asha paused, began to play with Natalie’s hair, and she signed] Just...have fun, Nat.”

Natalie turned around to her friend. “I will,” she smiled.

He’d done his undergrad at Morehouse. She had no trouble picturing him there.

He was part of the Alpha Rho chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity; she could picture that too.

He was born in Atlanta. An elementary and Sunday school teacher and a thunderous deacon raised him. Yolanda and Anthony Senior.

“Neo-soul,” Anthony Jones said with the charismatic smirk that, even in the brief length of time she’d known him, had already cast a spell on her. He took a sip of wine, slowly, never

taking his eyes off of her, in that way that men do that once used to creep her out.

“Neo-soul,” she questioned, looking up at him from a plate of jerk chicken. His brown eyes were dark and warm in the light from the candle.

Anthony nodded. “Exactly what I said. It’s so unique, so soothing, something I could listen to for the rest of my life. You must come over and listen to it sometime.”

“I’ve heard it before,” she told him confidently, remembering a time when she played a CD of it in Brandon’s car and watched his face wince in dislike.

“Not in the way that I can play it for you,” he told her. “I’ve found some stuff that I guarantee you’ve never heard before in your life...”

“Really?”

“Yes...”

“Well maybe, someday, I’ll have to take you up on that offer.”

He sure was confident. She felt as though she’d been in his presence before - or something chillingly similar.

Anthony Jones took another sip of wine, cleared his throat, and said, “Natalie Chandler...tell me a little about yourself...where did you grow up? Any siblings? Likes? Dislikes? Any previous long-term relationships?”

Natalie nervously broke off a piece of chicken with her fork, thought seriously about mentioning *him*, but said, “Grew up in Decatur, two sisters, Maya and Sidney, Biochemistry ma-

job at UGA, I take the MCATs this year and I want to be a pediatrician.”

“Very good profession...but that’s it? There’s got to be more to you than that...”

“I’m a simple girl. Just your average southern girl...”

He nodded, narrowed his eyes in her direction and seemed satisfied with her curt answer.

She thought the dinner a disaster, and was slightly elated that he was driving her home. Old school R&B played over the radio, slowly drowning out the deafening silence between them.

And she gazed out the window, toward the stars. And she wanted to bang her head against the window when she saw Brandon in them, in the blackness that flanked them, in their distance.

She hadn’t allowed herself to cry in weeks.

But it was only after Anthony’s offer to take her dancing at the end of the week that she locked herself in her bedroom, slid down the closed white door, and slumped to the floor like a lazy drunk, as tears stained her cheeks.

She was finally free.

Isn’t that what she always searched for?

Should she not be glad that Brandon was finally granting her that? *Thank the Lord* that he was out of her life! She could finally regain her identity, her space, her air!

Anthony Jones took her dancing at the end of the week. And he’d smile that charismatic smile that was starting to drive her wild. And he’d hold her unnaturally close while he licked his big brown lips. There were no games with him; there were no secrets, no sneakiness. He had no trouble showing her his attraction to her. The pulsating beat that resonated around them became her impression of him. He was downtown city lights, the stars in the sky, he was soul.

“So...” he told her, yelling over the music, voice barely audible.

“So,” she repeated, finding it difficult to look him in the eye.

“Natalie Chandler,” he told her, gripping her small hand in a way that made her slightly uncomfortable.

“Hmm?”

He twirled her around once, long hair wrapped up in a makeshift bun from the sweat, hearing that beat...that beat that had become Anthony so quickly.

“Why are you trying to be a mystery to me?”

“I’m not trying,” she told him plainly. “Like I said...just a simple southern girl...”

He looked at her, nodding slowly. “And what does a simple southern girl like to eat?”

She found his attempt to get to know her endearing. She enjoyed that fact that he tried for her, enjoyed the fact that he

was courteous, and she would allow it to fill the space that his charm could not.

“Anything that my Mama and Grandma cook...”

“A family girl...I like those...so do *you* cook...?”

“Perhaps...”

“I’ll take that as a yes...I bet you can’t cook as well as my sister...”

“Maybe not...but it keeps my family satisfied...”

“Well maybe you’d like to test that someday...you look like a girl who can burn...”

She laughed at that comment, thinking of the time that she fixed shrimp and grits for Brandon for the first time.

“*Tal, what is this?*”

“*Shrimp and grits, you buffoon...you like shrimp...*”

“*Yes, but with grits?*”

“*It’s a low-country thing, you see,*” she’d told him. “*Asha taught me...just try it for me please...*”

“*You’d better be glad you’re so pretty...*”

“Yes,” she told this caramel-complexioned Anthony Jones with a grin. “Someday...”

She questioned her motives with the man, aged close to thirty, as they walked down the sidewalk of downtown Athens the next night. It was balmy and the skies were clear, and she held onto his arm, allowing the same beat to fill her head as he spoke. She came close to appreciating the smoothness in his

voice and the smell of his cologne. It wasn’t too strong, wasn’t too overwhelming, but pleasant, *really* pleasant.

And he was a snazzy dresser, wasn’t he? Yes, he seemed to be a sucker for the bright colors, which looked good on his light brown skin. And he didn’t like to pry.

He sure did like the surface questions, huh?

He wasn’t pushy like Brandon. For once, someone was on her schedule.

She was beginning to love the sound of his voice. It was nowhere as deep as Brandon’s, and it didn’t pierce her ears the way his always did whenever he felt really passionate about something.

But it had the dialect that she was familiar with, that she *loved*. It reminded her of her mama’s old school music on Saturdays, of the poplars at the end of Green Hill Street, of Grandma’s singing voice...something as smooth as butter...yes, that was it...*butter...*

She told Mama about him one night on the phone a month later. She figured it was going somewhere then.

“What’s his name, Nattie?”

“Anthony...Anthony Jones...”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a pediatrician here at St. Mary’s.”

“You sound happy...are you happy?”

“Yes, Mama...yes, I think I am...”

“Natalie Savannah...your first *real* boyfriend...I would love to meet him one day, my darlin’...”

“And you will, Mama...”

Asha loved him for his success, for what he could do for Natalie’s career, and the fact that Anthony treated them both to expensive dinners on random occasions, whenever he could get a night off from work. Anthony loved Asha’s humor, loved hearing about her crazy Creole grandma and about dodging black snakes in the bayou.

Of course, he managed to get her to cook for him; something that took her months to do for Brandon, and still didn’t feel nearly as satisfied as she did with Anthony.

“Come on, sweet pea,” he’d coax. “I’m in the mood for a home cooked meal...I won’t ask again for another...well, I can’t promise when I’ll ask again...it’s just so good!”

Yes, fried fish was his favorite of hers...and yes, unfortunately...she was a better cook than his sister...Karen, was her name...Karen Jones-Cameron, a successful real estate agent, living in Peachtree City, the Jones children’s birthplace, recently married to a banker. She’d asked to speak to Natalie one night on the phone as they watched TV at his house in Winterville.

“Your name is Natalie?”

“Yes, it is.”

“That’s a beautiful name, you’ve got there,” the sister said. *“Ever wonder why you were named that?”*

“Not really...guess my mother thought it was a beautiful name too...”

“And you’re taking care of my brother?”

“Yes, I certainly am...”

At four months, they went to a church cookout together, ate barbecue on a shared plate under the shade of a pink crepe myrtle, the sun peeking through, gospel in the background, his teenaged cousin, Sierra, asking her so many questions that she figured she’d burst.

“Your hair is pretty...is it real?”

“Yes...”

“Where do you get your nails done?”

“I do them myself...”

“Do you really like Anthony...?”

“Yes, I do...”

“Did you know that he had a bad case of halitosis when he was younger?”

Natalie thought about all the times that they’d kissed.

“No, he didn’t tell me that...” she said, smiling.

“Well, now I just told you...it was really bad...he had to take medicine and everything...”

Natalie figured that if Sierra were trying to deter her from liking him, then she was completely unsuccessful with it. She didn’t care. She only watched him play with his older brother’s three-year-old daughter, Serena, and knew that she liked him.

And at twilight, while Mahalia Jackson wailed in the background, and the roar of Anthony’s uncles’ laughter sailed against the cooling breeze of a falling Georgian day, he leaned

in to kiss her cheek...just enough to send a special chill down her spine...just enough to appreciate his patience...just enough politeness for a church function.

At six months, she was walking back to her desk at St. Mary's with a cup of black coffee between her small hands, and she caught him in Kerry's room. The five-year-old who only had weeks left.

Cancer.

Anthony spoke of her sometimes over dinner; of the funny things that she said, of the cute way that she wrinkled her nose, of the way that *Tony* passed through her lips. Natalie walked past the room just as Anthony was tickling her and adjusting her pillow, just as he was reaching for a book by her bed, opening it, and beginning to read it.

Yes, at six months, Anthony became less of a mystery, Anthony became less distant. They'd stolen kisses in a broom closet around the corner during his lunch break. Anthony became her boyfriend.

At eight months, Ant took her to dinner one night, and gave her an expensive bracelet.

"I want you to wear this everyday, Natalie," he'd told her. "I love you...I really, really love you..."

She didn't say it back.

She only pinched the bracelet between her fingers as she gazed at it.

And as they walked out of the restaurant, he stopped her, holding her close that chilly night, his face close to hers, whispering, "Why don't you let me in, Natalie Chandler? I'm *here*... I'm only here for you..."

She nodded, attempted a smile, feeling a sense of déjà vu run its course through her mind and said, "I'm sorry...I know...I'll try..."

That night, he drove her home, kissed her sweetly. She stormed into her dark apartment, scurried to her bedroom and slammed the door behind her. She allowed her purse to slip through her fingers, and she slid down the door onto the floor. She had the audacity to cry there in the darkness.

She then considered the whole ordeal completely unfair.

...

It was at ten months that she fell in love with Anthony Jones.

She considered herself lucky to have found him, considered the fact that she enjoyed his eyes, enjoyed the way he danced when he listened to his music, enjoyed the way his face lit up when she presented some of her best dishes before him, enjoyed the way that he talked to her family in Decatur after church. He'd helped her mama take out the trash, had helped her wash the dishes, had helped her slice the eggs for the potato salad. He then retired to the back porch with her uncles to talk fishing and football.

“I love him,” Mama said. “Marry him, Nattie. He’s a doctor, he’s good-lookin’, he’s Christian...”

Natalie stood in the kitchen with her mama, her grandma and her two sisters. They stared through the window over the sink, watching Ant and the rest of her family.

“Marry him? Mama, let Nattie *breathe*,” Maya told their mother.

Yes, Natalie thought, let her breathe. Each day needed its own attention. She refused to think so far in the future.

“I think he’s fine, isn’t he fine?” Sidney said, holding the baby as it cooed.

“He sure is a smart little negro, isn’t he?” Granny said.

“He’s fine...*really* fine,” Sidney said.

“You already said that, Sidney,” Maya retorted.

“Well...I’m saying it again...he’s fine.”

“He’s Christian,” Mama said. “Christian boys are always good-looking.”

“Not Darius,” Maya laughed. “No wonder he always sat in the back row.”

“Or under his grandma...”

Sidney and Maya laughed.

“He is cute,” Granny said. “A cute little negro...too light-skinned though...he got white folks in his family? He looks like he got white in his blood.”

“Is he mixed, Natalie?” Mama asked. “He does look a little mixed...”

“Does it matter?” Maya asked. “He’s cute.”

“Exactly,” Sidney said. “Like I said...”

“Looks like your Uncle Gerald has a new fishing partner,” Granny said.

“Or someone to run his mouth off to about Aunt Miriam,” Maya said. “I don’t know why they aren’t divorced as much as they fight...”

“They love each other,” Granny said plainly. “If you love someone, you stick it out...”

That night, while her family played gin rummy in the kitchen, they sat on the couch in the living room of the bungalow on Green Hill Street and watched a movie.

“Clearwater,” he began awkwardly.

She turned to him. “What...as in Florida?”

He nodded. “I hear it’s really nice around this time of year.”

“Can you afford to take the time off?”

“I haven’t taken a vacation in years.” He never took his eyes off of the television. “And you look stressed.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve been weighing those med school options for weeks.”

“I want to go to a good school.”

A slight pause followed, then Ant said, “We leave next Wednesday.”

“What? *Anthony*...”

“All taken care of, sweet pea...oceanfront room at the Sheraton...dinner cruise that night...maybe a walk on the beach beforehand...”

“Anthony...”

“You’ll have fun...*we’ll* have fun...and I finally want to see what you look like in a bathing suit.”

They traveled together on a warm day, where the sun was shining, Ant’s smooth music playing over the radio.

He booked the suite on the top floor overlooking the sea, and she stood on the veranda for several minutes and watched the waves.

“We should go walking,” Anthony Jones told her, reaching for her hand.

They held hands on the beach, he made her laugh, and she sunk brown toes deep into the sand below her.

“It’s a cheesy dinner cruise,” he laughed. “Expensive, but cheesy...”

“I don’t care...I really don’t care...let’s do it,” she told him, surprising herself when she initiated the kiss between them.

She wore her favorite dress that night; a pretty white one with big red flowers all over it. And she wore her hair in that low, messy bun that Ant loved.

He was behind her, holding onto her waist as they boarded the *StarLite Majesty*, a white yacht with tented windows and three decks, the sun setting over the horizon, the balmy smell of salt in the air. They were given an assigned table shortly after boarding on the top deck, near the hardwood dance floor. Ant sat her down first, a single votive candle flickered between them, and the pink-smear of dusk to her right, falling slowly over Tampa Bay.

They were handed menus, soft music of the live entertainment began to play, and shortly after, they were setting sail. Natalie began to feel the sway of the ship beneath her, and she glanced at Ant across the table, who studied his menu silently.

“I like the chicken,” he randomly remarked moments later, keeping his eyes glued firmly in the menu.

She glanced at her own menu, replying, “Yes, that looks good, darlin’...”

“Is that what you want?” Ant asked her, placing his menu down.

“Yes, the chicken is fine,” she smiled. “I’ll take the chicken.”

“And wine? Do you want wine?”

“Whatever tastes good with chicken.”

“Pinot...Pinot Grigio, definitely.”

“Pinot Grigio, it is, then...”

A waiter handed Natalie a glass of the Pinot Grigio and swallowed the contents of it shortly following its arrival, hearing Anthony talk about his attendees, still feeling that sway, still gripping the empty glass between her boney fingers.

Tenth months, she reminded herself, summoning the waiter again...yes, that's right, pour me another glass, don't be selfish...

She glanced out towards the bay, saw the falling sun hide beneath the horizon, felt the breeze cool her warm brown skin, wondered how, in the scope of her twenty-one years of life, that she'd ever get to a moment like this, that Anthony Jones, as fine and as brilliant and as talkative as he was, would find her one day. It was hard to believe that one year later, she'd allow herself to realize, somewhat at least, his slight significance, that yes, maybe (just maybe) she loved him too, finally...

She reached for his hand across the table as darkness fell, as his brown skin glowed under the warm light of the candle. Yes, she would work with this, wouldn't she? She would allow him to love her. And she would allow herself to love him too. She would find some undiscovered nook in her soul that could reach out to him.

Yes, she had to.

He smiled. "Ten months, Natalie Chandler..."

"Ten months, Anthony Jones," she replied with a smile.

"You look amazing...."

"Likewise..."

"I love you," he told her, squeezing her hand.

"And I love you too..." she responded.

"Aren't you glad that you came to Clearwater?"

"So far," she said with a sigh. "We have three more days to go...have any more surprises up your sleeve?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes, I would...I've come to hate surprises..."

That didn't stop Anthony from pulling her out of her chair as soon as the band started, following a long line of the elderly that had already started heading in that direction.

"Come on, sweet pea," he said, smiling majestically.

"Don't be so shy..."

It was then that she wished she'd finished that second glass a wine, so a third could have been brought out to her, so she wouldn't have to suffer through the embarrassment of dancing in front of all those people.

She didn't think that her stomach would take it.

But, she had to remind herself of her mission to love him, to appreciate him, to do whatever made him happy. And, if dancing made him happy, then she'd dance with her boyfriend.

He pulled her close, smiling, her hair a product of a gale behind her, her dress following.

"You look beautiful," he whispered close to her face, his breath warm, her insides churning. "Did I tell you that?"

"Amazing, *yes*...beautiful, *no*..."

"Beautiful...definitely beautiful..."

“Well...thank you,” she said. “I always enjoy your compliments...keep them coming...”

“Well...you deserve them,” he said, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “I thought you would have known that by now...?”

She leaned in to kiss him. And in the balmy climate, in the peace of the breeze, she enjoyed his full brown lips.

“This isn’t so bad, is it?” he whispered into her face.

“What isn’t?”

“You and I...this trip...this weather...”

“Yea, it’s kind of nice...”

“You can say ‘Thank you, Ant’...”

“Thank you...” she smiled.

He kissed her.

Something about his grasp on her made her feel certain euphoria then, inhaling his nearness, hearing the melodic music from the band play.

Ten months? Really?

Her chin found his shoulder blade, her thoughts were nonexistent and his large brown hands gripped her tighter. This moment reminded her of why she’d fallen in love.

“You’re the one, Nat,” he whispered. “I really think you’re the one for me...”

Her insides froze.

She continued to sway with him, portraying herself as nonchalant, hoping that she heard the wrong thing, hoping he didn’t say what she *thought* he said.

And at that moment, she couldn’t understand why people had such a hard time leaving things the way they were.

Then Natalie Chandler stared straight ahead of her, the band started a new song, and Anthony Jones began to twirl her around wildly, his feet moving miraculously to the beat.

“My Mama taught me to dance this way,” he bragged to her.

She only nodded, enveloped in the numbness of his presence, felt the elderly crowd around them slowly stop dancing and encircle them, and she looked out toward the crowd for comfort, saw that all eyes were on them, for whatever reason.

Natalie’s eyes then focused on a singular pair, ones she came to recognize more than her own, bluer than the water below them.

Disbelief quickly dismantled her general sensibility.

She was almost sure that Brandon Greene was staring at her from the seated crowd, and she felt no greater sensation.

Warmth filled her body again and Ant twirled her round once more. She attempted to readjust her focus.

Her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Her eyes feverishly blinked under the weight of her vision; then his face came into view, then his broad shoulders, clothed in black, then the goddess Sophia, remarkable in a glittering black dress, who, luckily, did not see her.

She pulled away from Anthony, said only, "I'll be back," and headed towards the lower deck in an attempt to get away.

God, to only get away...

She went to the lowest level, closest to the water, found a railing, found silence, gripped the railing and took a deep breath. She allowed the shock to cover her, fill her body with unease, and she reminded herself that once upon a time, she was sure that she'd never see him again.

"Shoot, shoot, shoot!" she forced between clenched teeth in whisper, exhaling deeply, stomping her right foot.

She began to pace as the sky melted away into a bluish-black, her face hidden in shadow, the wind in her hair, the sound of the current below her.

"Shoot, shoot, shoot..."

The desperate task to erase his image from her brain proved to be more arduous than she had the power for.

Erase, discard, be done with.

It was easier. So much easier.

She started in the other direction when, standing eerily in the falling shadow, Brandon emerged, causing her to suck in her breath, and backtrack on instinct.

He walked toward her steadily. His eyes never left her face.

It was then that time stopped, if only for a second, so that she could get readjusted to the curves and the lines of his face, the smell of his proximity, to the idea that part of her still remained with him.

It was dream-like, his presence seemed, reminding her of the time where her feelings toward him were clearcut and seemingly everlasting, a time where she couldn't imagine him going anywhere, a time where she couldn't imagine loving anyone else as much as she loved him.

She broke her stillness and began to pace again. But she felt the nervousness ride the length of her body.

The ignoring failed miserably.

She glanced at him periodically through her pacing: the way he stood there, in all his beauty, never looking more masculine, more sure of himself, more daunting.

She was still afraid of him.

And it angered her just enough to where she lunged out in an attempt to slap him across the face. But he quickly intercepted her spontaneous action as though he'd anticipated it, grabbing her arms to restrain her.

She fought him a little but quickly reminded herself of how strong he was.

She stopped struggling, and his forehead found hers...

Natalie fought the urge to cry as he loosened the grip on his arms.

But it was only a matter of time before he got settled into her, releasing a slow, smooth breath. It was at this point that she was able to break free of his grasp, flatten her palm and slam it into his cheek.

He took a step back and glared at her, rubbing his cheek soothingly. He then cleared his throat.

She internally begged him not to look at her that way.

It was only a matter of seconds before she crumbled into tears. That instant she hated him, hated everything about him, hated the way he made her feel inside, hated that even after a year, he still affected her.

“Meet me on Pass-a-Grille Beach after midnight...” he whispered.

And he started to walk away. “You must be out of your mind if you think that I’m going to come anywhere near you and that godforsaken beach!”

He continued walking, disappearing into the darkness as he had come.

...

“Are you feeling alright? You’re looking a little...*green*...”

He loved playing doctor even when he wasn’t in the hospital, huh?

She stood by Anthony in the bathroom, glared into the mirror like a zombie while he, completely unaware of the events on the yacht, simply brushed his teeth at eleven that night, like always, right on time. He only asked if she was okay when he felt that she wasn’t listening to one of his many doctoral anecdotes, of which it seemed he had an endless supply.

Natalie looked at him, smiled artificially and nodded, “Yes, darlin’, I’m alright...”

“Glad to hear it,” he told her, spitting out the remainder of toothpaste in his mouth. He reached for her arm, rubbed it a

little, pulled her into his body, and gave her a slow embrace, kissing the side of her face.

“I think we should get up early and watch the sunrise, what do you think about that, Natalie?”

She nodded hesitantly. “Yes, that sounds nice...”

He chuckled into her cheek a little, pulled her closer, took a deep breath and said, “I meant what I said earlier, Natalie...I just want it to be you and me...it doesn’t have to be tomorrow, or the next day...but someday...”

“Mm-hmm,” was all that she said into his shoulder blade, attempting to sound gleeful.

She left Anthony lying in bed when the clock struck midnight. Tiptoeing, she reached into her suitcase, retrieved the same white dress she’d worn earlier that night, then frantically attempted to search for the keys to Anthony’s car, as Anthony stirred softly in bed, as the sound of the waves from the open veranda door poured through the room.

She found the keys in Ant’s jacket pocket, and when she dropped them, she froze, and waited for Anthony to stop stirring. It was then that she questioned if the trip was worth it all, if she could muster up the strength it took to stand up to him and say what she felt.

If she even knew what she felt at all anymore...

Natalie soared down the causeway, heading in the direction of the south end of the barrier islands, keeping her eyes ardently focused on the road, as if she was confident that some greater force would guide her.

She drove across a bridge, coming into the coastal part of St. Petersburg, in Ant's black Lexus, with only the music in the car, the stars, the fleeting streetlights and the black water to keep her company.

She reached Passe-a-Grille moments later, an island which was only two blocks wide, giving a darkening view of the Gulf on one side and the deep Atlantic on another. She veered off of Gulf Boulevard, finding a narrow road called Tidewater Alley. She pulled off the side of that road, into a bed of baby sea oats, killed the engine.

It was only then she allowed herself to feel guilty. She waited till it passed before she got out of the car, her hands a shaking mess, her body warm, her thoughts blurred.

She attempted a deep breath, to clear her mind, and headed in the direction of the beach, praying that being near the water would bring her solace.

It was there, walking along the shoreline, that she found Brandon. And she walked toward him, walked faster than she'd ever in her entire life, losing her breath in the process.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, his hands found her waist, and he lifted her up, his strength only heightening her desire for him, and she kissed him, hard, long, deep, losing herself momentarily, and a single tear ran the length of her face.

And then he lowered her onto the grainy sand, she still held onto him, their foreheads grazing, and he whispered against her lips, "Do you love him, Tallie?"

She sighed, played with his hair a little, taking in its scent, and nodded, "Yes...y—yes, I do, Brandon..."

She said this to spite him. She watched his face fall.

Silence followed. She couldn't imagine that she'd say that to him, and she didn't know whether it felt good or bad, and she wondered if it hurt him.

"Do—do you l—love her?"

She felt him sigh against her face, felt the warm air. "I don't know," he told her.

And they kissed again.

"You hurt me," she told him, feeling another tear fall.

"I know," he told her. "I'm sorry."

"And you're with *her*..."

"I know," he said. And he kissed the side of her face.

She pulled away from him, he saw the tears in her eyes, and he reached up to wipe them away. She slapped his hand down, and wiped them away herself.

She didn't need him...never really needed him for anything...

"That's all you can say, Brandon? 'You know'? 'You're sorry'?"

He stared at her.

"Do you think that seeing you with her is easy? Do you think that you can just say sorry and expect it to all go away? It made me sick, Brandon...it really did..."

"Well, how do you think I felt, Tallie? How the fuck do you think I felt when I saw that guy with his hands all over you?"

Kissing on you like you're some piece of meat? Do you think that seeing you with him made me feel any better?"

"What makes you think that I'm at all concerned with your feelings, Brandon? What makes you think that I give a *rat's behind* about you and your feelings? How do you think I felt, Brandon? Did you ever consider my feelings? You walked out of my life without so much as a phone call? Do you think that that made me feel better? You know what? You make me sick...you make me sick! Go! Go have fun with her...leave me be! Leave me with my life and I'll leave you with *hers*...I think that's what you wanted all along, huh? *Her*..."

She backed away slowly, eyes locked to his, waiting for the moment when he'd begin to follow her.

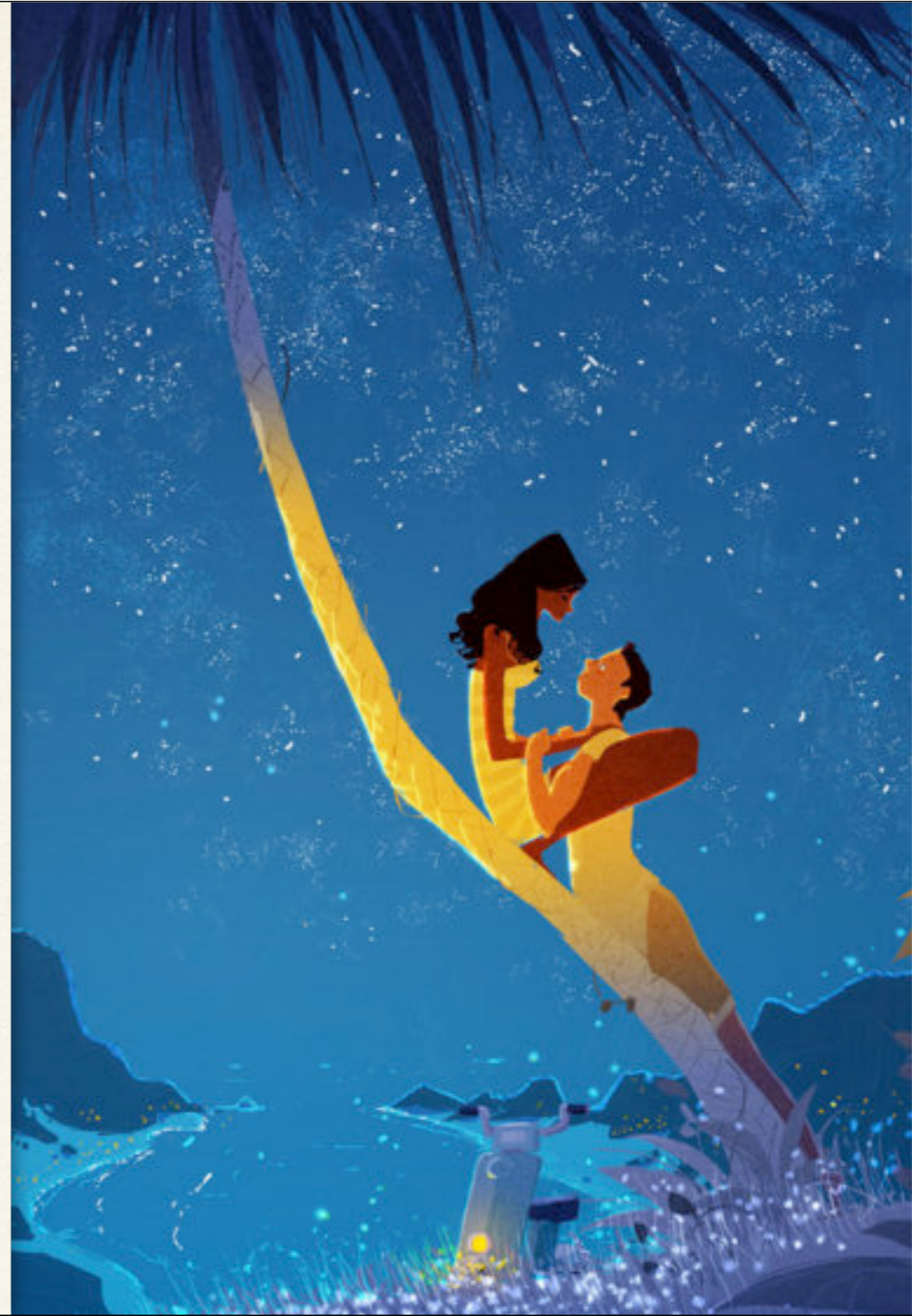
But he called after her quietly, extending his hand, his deep voice barely above the sound of the waves. Natalie only continued to back away, hoping that her heart was still intact, hoping that the warmth on her lips would go away, hoping for enough strength to get into that car and drive away.

Inside, she shook as she climbed into the driver's seat and wiped the tears from her cheek. She took another glance toward the moon-smeared shoreline, saw his shadowed silhouette against the starry, black canvas and sighed. She convinced herself that this was the right thing to do.

And as she started the engine, her insides warmed to the small triumph.

Chapter 11

THE BREEZE IN
PASSE-A-GRILLE



HE COULD EASILY REMEMBER when he fell in love with Natalie. She was only a sophomore at the time, with a perfect little bottom, legs for days, and the kind of smile that made him forget his name, or anything else that happened before she walked into his life. She wore her hair in those high ponytails, had this indescribably sweet southern drawl that reached high levels of cuteness whenever she yelled at him for belching in her face without excusing himself or whenever he played too rough during their constant wrestling. She'd steal his favorite Bulldogs pullover at least once a week, and he loved the way it hung off of her body.

He'd just broken up with Sophia for the first time that year, and Natalie was at his house more often than he went to class each week, reading her Organics Lab book, the wisps of her delicate black hair, falling into her face, sitting on his grandmother's worn sofa in his living room. She'd piddle and paddle back and forth from the sofa to the kitchen, barefoot, the pullover hiding her bottom, picking pieces off of the cake that she'd just baked for him and Scotty to eat. The boys never minded her being there. Him, especially, who knew that he loved her each time that she touched him, or rested her head on his shoulder, or made him laugh with her awkward facial expressions.

He loved her to the point that it made him ache, to the point that he thought less about his mistakes with Sophia and more about how the sun hit Natalie's face in such a way that her brown skin glowed. He wanted her so badly that he lost

sleep, and counted the moments until he could see her again. But when he was around her, he pretended to be as carefree as possible, hoping that his heart didn't cave in each time that she gave him that doe-eyed smirk.

It all made sense now, didn't it? The way Natalie stood there before him on the beach, her dark eyes watching him closely, as if to study him, as if she didn't know every piece of him already, as if she didn't know why he'd disappeared for so long, as if she couldn't feel that he still loved her, even now, when he lay next to Sophia, his first in many ways.

He had come to the realization some time ago that he didn't make much sense without her, and he knew it each time that he past a marker that reminded him of her; something inexplicably beautiful that he didn't notice before, that he only noticed when he was around her.

He lost something inside of him when he left her. How funny he was to think that the missing pieces of him were with Sophia, the person he once devoted his world to, the epitome of what he thought love was, and how he was supposed to feel.

After he left Natalie, he remained in Georgia, becoming a nomad on the road. Everything he once valued in his life was caving in on him. And he couldn't breathe.

He strangely left everything behind: his classes, his job, his friends, Natalie. It seemed that nothing really made sense to him anymore, even Natalie, the one person he genuinely treasured more than anything else that this life could offer him.

He left her because he felt she didn't love him. Was that not the craziest thing he could ever feel? He'd sense that, when he looked into her eyes, he saw nothing, and was reminded of the same sensation the night of their one-year anniversary. How his stomach turned when sensed that she didn't want a forever with him, despite the fact that he couldn't even fathom enduring a life without her, landing on a point where all his thoughts, and all his feelings revolved around her, protecting her, being with her, laughing with her. He was sure that those feelings evoked in the presence of Natalie made his time with Sophia seem trite, jaded and completely obsolete.

Yes, loving Tallie was different. Loving her harvested nerves that had never been stepped on before. He was a man wildly in love, falling further, fast, deep and hard, on the cusp of one of the biggest transitions in his early adult life.

He'd gone away to clear his head, find a straight path of thought, find solace. And then Scotty called one night, saying that she'd come to the house on Trent road.

"She was crying," Scotty had informed him, sounding rather pitiful. "I've never seen her cry that hard."

He didn't respond – the idea of him doing that to her made his stomach ache a little.

"She was worried about you," Scotty continued. "She thought that something may have happened to you, but she didn't know what. She didn't know what to do with herself. There was no way that any of us could reach you. You need to call her, Brandon. You need to call her and straighten all of

this out with her. It's Natalie, man. She doesn't deserve this. If you still love her, you'd call."

A wave of guilt fell over Brandon's senses. He had no choice but to agree with Scotty – Natalie definitely didn't deserve this type of treatment, especially from him. But what would happen when he picked up that phone, dialed her number and heard her voice on the other end? Would he lose his inner sanity at the sound of it? He didn't think she'd receive him as well as she'd done before – there was simply too much damage circling between them for him to plainly explain his actions to her in a reasonable manner and have her be the same understanding and nurturing Natalie that'd she'd been before. If anything, Scotty had always been that one unswerving friend, the one that knew and understood everything about him and his bullshit when he was sure that no one else did. Scotty should have known where he'd been hiding and why he had to leave.

"Where the fuck have you been, man?" Scotty had asked him.

"Around," Brandon said, plainly. "And I'll be home soon..."

He came coursing into the city limits of Athens shortly following their phone conversation, trembling at the sight of all the memories that he left behind, feeling as though the city had changed and the people in it.

He'd returned to Athens, praying that she'd receive him as wholeheartedly as she'd done before. He desperately wanted

forgiveness for his foolishness, for his stupidity. She simply had to know that they were meant to be...they were always meant to be – although there was no way of knowing whether or not she'd still be there. Perhaps she'd decided to flee as he had done; perhaps the memories were just too much for her to bare. But no, he didn't give his Natalie the credit that she deserved – she was a fighter, a stubborn, effervescently beautiful fighter, who thrived in finishing the things that she started, no matter how arduous, no matter how dreadful.

He was walking downtown his first night back, reveling in their familiar haunts, en route to meet Scotty at a pub at the corner of Brent and Laurel. He'd passed by Sabby's Caribbean, had glanced through the window, and spotted a girl who sat close to the wide-paned glass that looked very similar to Natalie. He'd slid his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, narrowed his eyes and glared at her. He'd identified the smoothness of her brown skin, the way her nose wrinkled when she found something to be really funny. He'd recognized those brown ears, that stuck out whenever she wore her hair in a tight ponytail, and he'd watched her eyes change the way they only did when she felt really vulnerable.

She sat across from another guy, at a small, round candlelit table, sipping her drink bashfully, watching the guy lean into her and reach for her hand delicately. Something inside of Brandon made him feel sick, and he resisted the urge to run inside, knock the guy's lights out, and take Natalie away from

him. That was his answer – the one that he'd dreaded learning – Natalie Chandler had moved on.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

He met up with Scotty at the bar, sat beside his friend on the stool, and had downed the first bottle of Budweiser that was placed before him with masculine ease. Hell, if I can't have you, I can have this and be just as satisfied...you'll see...

He then turned his head to the right, just before he poured all of his sorrows into a shallow glass of scotch that followed, and Sophia appeared through a break in the crowd, standing alone, sipping slowly from a martini glass, her loose curls pinned up nicely, her black dress clinging to each part of her body. She'd approached him slowly, and that same sneaky grin that had captured him so many years ago, left him spellbound. She was a welcomed dark silhouette, a stunning vision to both his blurry vision and wounded heart.

“Well, hello, there, Randy...”

Calling him that took him back to the moment when he'd first told her that he loved her, sitting outside of her dormitory on the rickety porch swing. They were only eighteen, and he'd pushed her flaxen curls out of her face, had kissed her full lips softly, had told her that he loved her, and she'd called him Randy. He could have sworn that she was an angel then, and he'd thought that nothing made more sense than being with her, had fallen in love with her baby hands, her porcelain skin, her light giggle.

Calling him that had pushed him, in pure, uninhibited disorientation, to go to her apartment the afternoon following their bar encounter. It rained, hard and uncontrollably, and Sophia Christine had opened the door to find him a drenched mess. He'd missed those green eyes and the light in her hair. His mind thirsted for the way things were.

He desired nothing more than her curves, than cupping her buttocks between his hungry hands. And the blond vixen, the greedy nymphomaniac, took him inside, removed all of his clothes in rapid motion, and as the winter rain poured, she left him satisfied, left him with the feeling he'd been needing for some time, left her mark, left her scent, all over him.

"You're the only one," she'd whispered to him afterwards, the white sheets, clinging to their skin. "You're the only who could ever fuck me right..."

He remained silent, quivering in the feel of his tainted body while she traced her fingers along the chiseled lines in his chest. Her touch was foreign, cold, her fingers unsettlingly spiny. He could feel her eyes wandering the length of his naked body, hungering for more. And when she pressed her small pink mouth against the space near his brown nipple, he innately flipped her on her back, affixed his hands to her narrow curves and took her love once more.

And as he lay motionless the second time, he thought of Natalie, loving her still. He swore his love, somewhere deep down in his gut, though he frequently sank into the soiled

sheets of Sophia's bed, where a prison often mounted comfort and familiarity, where a lack of completion lied.

Sleeping with Sophia was to only temper the sting of his lonely nights. And as much as the naked Sophia stood on her bed, kneeling before him, pleading, her light eyes cast sweetly in moonlight, he always found an excuse to leave. He'd drive his green truck down the freeway, feel the breeze comb his hair, see Tallie in the stars, and remember things between them that he only wished he'd forget.

He would leave Sophia's bedside and he would come home to his dark house of blue siding, would strip himself naked, climb into the shower and run the scolding water over his body, hoping to wash it all away; all of his guilt, the remnants of Sophia that laid along his skin, wash away the tears, and the part of him that still held onto the notion that he'd return to Natalie one day, and she'd accept him with open arms.

But, despite his love, he continued in this same bizarre pattern. He ran back to Sophia's nest every time he felt that carnal sensation in his gut, knowing that she was just that easy. He refused to think that many guys had been in his same position since his departure over a year ago.

One night, after a fairly long session, she stopped him before he could reach for his underwear on the floor, and whispered, "Stay".

She then proceeded to convince him to accompany her on a business trip to Tampa for a week. They would stay in Pass-

a-Grille when she wasn't working and relax. They would take walks on the beach, do dinner overlooking the ocean.

Looking at Natalie on the beach in Passe-a-Grille, made more sense to him than anything else in his life. It brought back all of the regrets of leaving her, in his bed, drunkenly asleep, unaware. He remembered all of the memories of them pouring through him at that moment, shrouded in darkness, reaching out to touch her face, just that last time, realizing, of course, that it hurt that she was not ready to be with him for forever.

How could she not comprehend how much she'd hurt him? Could she not sense how angry he was with her?

He had always wanted to marry her.

And that ring, damn that ring! He figured that Natalie had found it, figured that she, knowing her tendency to overanalyze any situation placed before her, had come to her own conclusions, even before dinner had been served, and figured, at the peak of her intentional drunkenness, that what he said to her wouldn't matter.

She didn't want forever with him.

He'd bought the ring some time during the Christmas holiday, the same year that Natalie turned twenty. Asha and Scotty had even gone with him to the jewelry store downtown to help him pick out the right one. The ring had to be perfect, had to symbolize Natalie. At the seven months that they'd dated, he

knew that he wanted to propose, knew that Natalie was the one.

He simply had to garner up enough nerve to ask her.

For the weeks following his purchase he carried the ring with him, whenever they went out somewhere, waiting for the right moment to tell her how much he loved her, get down on one knee and ask her to be his wife.

He looked at Natalie on the beach in Passe-A-Grille, in that white dress, her image of innocence wrapped in its delicate fabric, and it all made sense.

...

He sat up on the bed, the coils beneath the surface, creaking beneath his weight, and Sophia stirred softly. With his head hung low, his hands clasped together, he felt the breeze from the cracked veranda door, cool the sweat upon his heated skin, his long body cast in the unruffled shadow of night.

Natalie ran through his mind.

He got to his feet, stretched his long arms high, yawned, and walked, slowly, long feet dragging, towards the veranda.

He gripped the wrought iron railing, felt the breeze about his skin, felt the urge to jump into his car, get the hell out of Passe-a-Grille and run to Clearwater Beach as fast as he could. Snatch her up. Take her away.

He would call her to tell her to meet him outside...they could make a quick break...nobody would have to know.

He crept back into the room, searched for his phone with desperation, felt it luckily in the back pocket of his jeans on the armchair by the door...

He dialed the familiar number, heard the first ring, then the second...then...

"I knew this would happen," Sophia was standing behind him, blond curls wild. Even after so many years had passed, she was still as beautiful as the first day he'd seen her. But even that didn't replace his emptiness.

She had just begun to cry; he saw the glistening of the salt-water about her cheeks. He dropped the phone, glared into Sophia's eyes, stood motionless.

She folded her arms tightly, sighed heavily.

"I saw it...on the boat," she said quietly. "Saw that look in your eyes...she was wearing that pretty dress...she had her hair all pretty...and she was with another guy...you didn't want her to be happy, did you? You just couldn't wait, could you?"

No. He arrogantly wanted to believe that the only way that Natalie could ever be happy is if they were together, loving each other.

He couldn't remember the last time he cried. He forgot how it felt, forgot the feeling of the tightness in his throat, the hard pound in his chest, the twisting in his heart.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. And he truly was. He was sorry for his baffling behavior, for sleeping with her, for making her believe that they could be something together again.

She remained calm, shockingly so, and he watched her take a deep breath, and say, "Don't be sorry...you have no reason to be sorry...I should have known better...you love her..."

Yes, he did, more than he allowed his eyes to reveal then, more than he ever loved the Sophia Christine Baldwin that stood before him.

"I'm messed up," he told her. "And I'm sorry..."

"You shouldn't be sorry, Brandon Greene," she told him. "We had a good run, didn't we?"

He nodded. Brandon and Sophia. They were something remarkable, once upon a time. But they had some sort of lustful, passionate thing, didn't they? Their mental connection was a complete façade.

He remembered the arguments.

"What the fuck were you thinking going to a party like that?" he'd yell at her.

"I wasn't thinking...I wasn't thinking, Sophia..."

"You never think, do you, Brandon Greene? You're supposed to be here, with me..."

"I need my freedom, Sophia...why can't you grant me that sometimes?"

"Who is she, Brandon? Hmm? What's her name? Is she a good fuck?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Every time you start talking that 'freedom' nonsense, there's usually a girl involved...so be honest with me...be honest!"

The bouts of jealousy.

“Why were you looking at her like that?”

“Looking at who?”

“The girl at the bar...was she pretty?”

“I wasn’t looking at any girl...you’re delirious...”

The angry tone in Sophia’s raspy voice would always stick out in his mind; and her cursing, her smoking, her lasciviousness, the late nights with her sorority sisters that left her passed out on the bathroom floor.

She was always one for a good party.

Sophia was never the friend, was rarely the comforter, the supporter, the source of intimacy, but was the first to jump on his case for talking to Susan from his Economics class or Jessica, his next door neighbor.

Natalie was air, was peace, was rooted soul, calmed him.

“Brandy, stop staring at me...do your homework...”

“I can’t help it...”

“You’ll be able to when you fail...”

“Have I told you how much I love you lately?”

“Have I told you how much I hate doing your homework for you?”

“Because you care about me...”

“You’re crazy...”

“Admit it...”

“Will you finish your homework and stop looking at me all creepily if I do...?”

“Scout’s honor...”

“If I didn’t...would I be sitting in this dirty place you call a bedroom all the darn time?”

“Thought so...”

He realized then, looking into Sophia’s tear-smearred eyes, that her presence in his heart had died...a long time ago, even...and she’d realized it too. He could plainly see that strange shutter in her body

He knew instantly, watching Natalie Chandler from across the deck that night, “The Way You Look Tonight” playing annoyingly in his head, Sophia gripping his hand uncomfortably tight, that he’d always been in love with her...always...the extent of which was foreign to him, the idea of which allowed him to believe in a world of idealism, awakened every numb nerve of uncertainty inside of him.

Sophia slept in another room that night. He didn't care.

Damn.

Instead, he reached for his phone again, dialed the number, watched the moon glow, heard it ring three times.

“Natalie...it’s me...I need you...”

Chapter 12

MOVING ON...



SHE OFTEN ENVISIONED living in Athens on a more permanent basis, after the storm of medical school died down, and she could form her world around the life she'd always wanted to lead. She always believed that the city was a perfect reflection of herself: quiet and comfortable with just a tinge of pleasant quirkiness. But it now took on a ghostly feel, and she found herself wandering around aimlessly like a disillusioned nomad, as pain and misperception disembodied her in a series of fragmented parts, and she persistently struggled to put herself back together again. She was viewing what Athens used to be to her through a thick, grey cloud that had everlastingly settled around her head and shoulders, and it refused to dissipate.

She never anticipated that she'd feel this way about a city she'd grown to love and appreciate for both coddling her and forcing her to grow up in a way that benefitted her. But now her mind and heart surged through a chain of roller coasters, driving her to the edge of her previously steadfast rationale, and she couldn't come to terms with the idea it may be gone forever.

The methodical aspects of her mind realized that she didn't understand much about romantic love, as easily as she understood platonic and familial love. But she understood that unlike Athens, it purposely opposed her as if it were the spiteful aspect of herself that she'd purposely chosen to suppress: it was impractical and untimely, cruel and devilish. And she couldn't understand why she chose to succumb to it. She felt

poisoned; and she was driven to act in ways that her previous self wouldn't have allowed.

In the middle of the week, where she'd previously promised to meet Anthony for lunch at his favorite place, she strangely cancelled at the last minute and she couldn't tell him the real reason why.

"I told Asha that I'd go to the doctor's office with her," she told him instead. "She's afraid to go alone."

"I love you," he told her simply. She mumbled through it vacantly in return and hopped in her car. Her mind often wandered to the dark niches in her thoughts that internally wished for Anthony to end it with her. Maybe that would be easier than admitting the truth to herself...maybe then she could find the answer she was searching for.

She glides effortlessly across town and onto a collection of familiar roads. She feels thoughtless and selfish and empty, but her plaguing curiosity still manages to slide through the cracks. She feels a peculiar aching in her chest as she veers onto a proverbial tree-lined street. She then feels her breath escape her. She knows that this is no casual drive to clear her head; and those who care about her would think she was crazy. She applies pressure to the brakes as she reaches the end of the road and she idles near a house of blue siding on Trent road. Although it's been several weeks since Clearwater, she swears she can still taste his lips, she can still smell his smell. And for a second she's almost certain he's by the pond, watching the ripples progress into nothingness as his thoughts drift with the breeze.

And she smiles, killing the engine.

His dirty soccer cleats are sitting in the dried grass of the front yard, right where he left them; a UGA flag from a yard sale a couple of years ago still swings off the porch; but most notably, his green Explorer is parked in the driveway. It still has the same New York license plate, with the same seven letters and numbers.

Brandon Greene is home again. She just needed to see it for herself.

There's a fleeting tick where she believes that she's coming to see him after her shift at the library is over; she's tired and all she can think of doing is curling up on his grandmother's old sofa and napping till he gets home from class.

She still has a key, and she questions whether or not she should just walk in.

There's a part of her that would get a kick out of surprising him, but the other part of remains perfectly still, as if some greater power is telling her not to move an inch. So, she inevitably chooses to scour through her thoughts meticulously. She knows that acting hastily would only end disastrously, and she can't imagine feeling any worse than she already does.

She takes a deep breath and makes a decision. Her cellular phone rings but she chooses to ignore it. She knows that it's Anthony. She knows that he's wondering why she hasn't returned to the hospital yet.

"Asha's appointment ran a little long," she'll tell him later. "But everything's fine with her..."

She's certain that things will return to normal if she just makes things right with him. She removes her seatbelt slowly and nerves climb the length of her body, and she ignores the idea that time and space will negatively affect their dynamic. But just as reaches for the door handle, slowly running her tongue across her dry lips, a baby blue BMW glides past her with precision and grace as it pulls into the driveway behind the green Explorer. And Natalie watches as a petite woman with dark brown hair exits slowly, wearing nothing more than a pair of shorts and a thin white tank top. She traverses up the sidewalk comfortably, as if she'd done it so many times before.

She stalls on the porch, rummages through her purse for a few seconds before she retrieves another set of keys. She unlocks the front door with ease and walks in quickly thereafter.

Natalie speeds off as a singular tear glides down her cheek.

...

The following week, she dawdles in the shower in the early evening. She knows that Anthony will be by soon to pick her up but she hasn't felt like doing much of anything. She regrets agreeing to go to the Art Walk downtown with him, even though a part of her admits to refusing to spend a lot of time with him for unknown reasons. She's become quite good at lying and coming up with random excuses and she hates herself for it. And she hates the fact that she hides the picture of her and Brandon every time he comes over. She wants no ques-

tions of who he was and why her eyes still loitered over his picture every once in a while, as if she were still living in a fantasy, as if she and Brandon were still having the same argument and had yet to make up.

There was a knock on the front door as she slid a strapless black romper up her body and pulled her hair back into a loose chignon. She chose to forego obnoxious amounts of makeup but Asha often assured her that peach blush looked amazing on her skin.

She let Anthony in as she ran back to her bedroom to get her bag. And when she returned, he eyed her curiously.

“What?” she questioned, her brows furrowed.

“Umm, where are the rest of your clothes, Nat?”

She examined herself for a few seconds and replied, “Didn’t you check the weather this morning? It’s supposed to be ninety degrees. It is the middle of June, Ant...”

“Look, whatever,” he replied with the roll of his eyes. He then reached for her hand, tugging her toward the door. “Let’s go...I want to get a table at 65 & George before they all get taken. Where’s Asha? I thought she was coming with us?”

“She said she’d meet us there,” she replied. “Apparently she’s bringing a date...”

Anthony chuckled a little. “I never thought the day would come...”

She smiled in return. “Neither did I...”

The Athens Art Walk was one of those peculiar things in town that consistently drew a full crowd as diverse as the United Nations and as big as a collegiate championship football game. And it was one of those peculiar events that she and Brandon and Asha and Scotty frequented during the summer months, because the drinks were cheap, the live street band was always entertaining, and the food was free in most galleries downtown. And in her past life, Natalie looked forward to this dramatic social scene because it always reminded her of why her friends were so great and it secured her reasoning for choosing to move to Athens.

Anthony loved it because some of his fraternity brothers were members of the popular street band, who played both original songs and took requests from the audience. This was their second year going together, and she confidently knew that Anthony would want to dance the night away – she was mentally preparing herself for it.

It took them several minutes to find a parking spot, as he obsessively wanted to find one as close to his favorite restaurant as possible.

“Anthony, sweetheart, it’s not that serious,” she told her once she was fed up. “Just park the car...”

“You’re the one that doesn’t like walking,” he told her, shaking his head. “I’m doing this for you, baby...”

“If I didn’t like walking, I wouldn’t have come to an Art Walk, now would I?”

“Fine, fine,” he huffed. “There’s a parallel spot right there, calm down...does Asha know where to meet us?”

“As if she could forget...”

They were seated under a large yellow umbrella outside and they both ordered a cocktail as they waited on the remainder of their party to arrive.

“Leave it to Asha to be late,” Anthony murmured, rolling his eyes.

“You got your table, Ant,” she replied. “What’s the point in complaining about Asha now? She’s not doing anything wrong...just drink your drink...”

Lord knows, she needed to drink hers. She should’ve ordered something stronger. There’s always next time.

“Any time you start acting all pissy, it means you had a bad day at work,” she reminded him. “Is that what this is about, honey? Did you have a bad day?”

“You were there, Natalie,” he began. “Did it look like I had a bad day?”

“No...”

“I didn’t have this attitude until I saw you in that getup,” he said. “Apparently you didn’t notice the number of guys who stared at you when we walked over here...”

“Of course I didn’t notice,” she shrugged. “I’m here with you...”

Physically, she thought, not necessarily mentally...

He took a sip of his cocktail, and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he replied, shaking his head. “I’m not starting the night off right. I’m being an asshole, aren’t I?”

She nodded. “A little bit, yea...”

He chuckled humbly. “Look at me, Nat...I’m edging on thirty and I still get insecure about my girlfriend’s beauty...I guess every day, I’m praying to God that some better man doesn’t come along and snatch you away...”

She doesn’t respond, but she slowly reaches for his hand to soothe him.

“I love you, Nat,” he replied, earnestly. “And I’ve played with some ideas in my head...I’ve often wondered whether or not to run them by you...”

“What types of ideas...?”

She suddenly felt a tinge of déjà vu.

“I own a home,” he began, sighing heavily.

“Yes,” she chuckled. “I think I’ve been there before...”

“And I’ve got too much room. I bought a king sized bed with no one to share it with. I bought a forty-two inch plasma television and I often watch it alone. I buy all of these groceries for a state-of-the-art stainless steel refrigerator and I often cook for myself...”

Natalie swallowed thickly, and murmured, “Anthony, what are you saying?”

He squeezed her hand tighter. “I’m saying I want you to move in with me...”

“What?”

“We’re perfect for each other, Natalie...we’re going down the same path, we grew up the same way, my mother loves you, I love you...it makes sense...”

She stares at him vacuously, and she realizes that the alcoholic beverage is still caught in her throat. She swallows it quickly before she chokes. She runs through a series of markers in their relationship that they haven’t met, that she feels as though should come before moving in together...sex, marriage, babies, another five or six years...

She was becoming all too familiar with men pushing the limits of their relationship...when would a lesson be learned?

“You’re quiet, Nat...say something, baby...”

She parts her lips to answer, in spite of not knowing what to say, and just as she scrambles to run a few excuses through her head...

“I’m here, you lovely black people! Sorry we’re late!”

She recognizes Scotty trailing behind her and she’s not surprised. But when she sees a considerably taller, broader man trailing behind them she feels her heart jump to her throat.

“Asha, you brought two dates,” Anthony teased. “They must be really special...”

Scotty and Asha approached the table but the third person lingered behind them. Their eyes were locked in an obnoxious pull of tug-of-war until she purposely diverted her eyes in Anthony’s direction.

“Anthony, shut up,” Asha replied, sitting down. She then turned to Scotty. “Scott, this is Anthony Jones...and you remember Natalie, don’t you?”

Natalie eyed her roommate angrily, but Asha only smiled impishly in return.

“Oh, yea, Natalie...Chandler, right?” Scotty replied.

“Sure,” Natalie replied. “Whatever you want it to be, Scotty...”

“And Anthony, this is my rude friend, Brandon,” Asha said, tugging on Brandon’s wrist. “Apparently, he’s shy...Brandon, this is Anthony and I’m not sure if you remember Natalie or not...”

She wanted to stop the charade, but everything was happening too fast. It was like watching a car accident happen...

She ran through a series of the nastiest curse words she could think of in her head. She felt a little better afterwards.

“Of course I remember her,” Brandon replied quietly. She saw the tightness of his lips and realized that he was angry but she didn’t know why. Shouldn’t he be loving this moment? Wouldn’t this be the perfect opportunity to humiliate her?

Brandon then finally sat down. He didn’t stop staring at her.

“Asha’s just messing with you, Anthony,” Scotty told him. “In actuality, we’re all just old friends...you know, some more than others...”

Natalie locked eyes with Scotty and she began to seethe.

“We just haven’t seen Natalie in so long,” Scotty sighed, shaking his head. “And lo and behold...Asha wants to take us out to dinner and there she is with a boyfriend of her very own...I’d heard rumors but I wasn’t sure...”

Anthony chuckled. “Well, it’s good to meet some of Natalie’s other friends, finally...I was starting to grow tired of hanging out with her family all the time...don’t take this the wrong way, but Natalie doesn’t really talk about her friends very much...it’s like she’s leading a double life or something...”

Suddenly, the table moved and they all realized that it was coming from Brandon’s direction. He cleared his throat and mumbled, “Sorry,” when they all looked in his way.

“Really?” Scotty replied. “You think you know someone...”

“Where’s that waitress,” Natalie said, clearing her throat. “I could use another drink...”

“Oh what an effect Anthony has had on you Natalie! You know, Natalie never really drank like that before...”

“Really?” Anthony said. “She always keeps a bottle or two of that white zinfandel in her apartment...”

Natalie and Brandon locked eyes for a moment.

“How long have you two crazy kids been dating, huh?” Scotty asked. “You two look like you came straight off the cover of a magazine...”

Anthony looked at her. “How long has it been, baby? Over a year?”

“Something like that, yea...Scott, you’re awfully chatty tonight...are you okay?”

“Natalie that’s so thoughtful of you to ask...I’m perfectly fine...you two look so comfortable, so in love...so...”

“Excuse me, I’ll be back...” Brandon murmurs, rising from his seat. The table grows quiet as they watch him disappear into the restaurant.

Anthony scoffs before saying, “I don’t mean to be rude, but he’s an odd guy, isn’t he?”

“Well, he doesn’t want me broadcasting this, but he’s had a rough couple of days...you know how it is, Anthony...you meet a girl, you think she’s the one, then she runs off with another guy before you have a chance to blink...”

“Ouch,” Anthony replied. He then wrapped his arm around Natalie. She suddenly felt as though she couldn’t breathe.

Scotty nodded. “Yea, definitely.”

“Scott, what was her name again?” Asha asked.

Scotty looked skyward and curled his lips in. “Oh, man...umm...Nadia? Natasha? Naomi? Nellie?”

“She must’ve been something to look at,” Anthony replied. Natalie shoved him a little.

“Oh, top-of-the-line, sir,” Scotty assured him. “Long, black hair, slender frame, dark searching eyes...”

“Scotty, I’m sure she couldn’t mean that much to him,” Natalie replied. “I mean, where is she now? For all you know, he could be messing with some other girl and not telling you...”

“I have all the confidence in the world, dear Tallie, that this girl is the only one he’s thought about for quite some time...”

She excused herself to the bathroom, and Asha followed her without a word. When they were securely behind the door, Natalie pressed Asha up against the wall.

“Before I kill you, I want you to fully explain yourself...”

“It was pure coincidence, I promise...you know they wanted to go to the Art Walk, and I wanted to go to the Art Walk...we had no idea that you were bringing Anthony...”

“Do you think I’m stupid, Ash?”

“No, of course not!”

“Do you think I’m retarded? Do you think I just woke up yesterday out of a twenty-year-long coma?”

“What are you talking about...? You need to take them and you need to leave. I don’t want Anthony to know about Brandon...and Scotty is getting mightily close...I’m freaking out...I never wanted to see him again, and now he’s sitting across from me? What type of game are you playing? You know how long it took for me to get over him...it’s already awkward enough ...”

“That’s because you’re making it that way,” Asha replied. She placed her hands on her friend’s shoulders.

“Look,” she began. “You know how Scotty is. He saw how upset you got over Brandon leaving you last year and he hasn’t gotten over it. He’s pissed that you’ve moved on. You know he’s going to speak his mind wherever he goes. I’ll try and

tame him through dinner and afterwards I’ll send them on their merry way. You won’t even have to talk to Brandon if you don’t want to. Besides, from what I hear, he’s been seeing this random brunette but he refuses to talk about her. You’re in the clear...”

For a moment, Natalie thought about bringing up the day she drove by their house and saw the girl walk into it at her own leisure. But Asha would probably think that she was crazy...it was beyond time for her to move on and let it go...

When she and Asha returned to the table, there Brandon sat with a beer in his hand, and she wondered where he’d gone. She thought about the brunette she’d seen that day and wondered why he was keeping it so secret. She didn’t like the burgeoning boil of pain and nausea rising inside of her as she took a seat beside her boyfriend again.

“You okay?” Anthony whispered close to her face. She turned to him, nodded, and pressed her lips against his once.

“Tell me, Anthony,” Scotty began. “What made you fall for Natalie?”

“Scott, I don’t think he wants to play Twenty Questions with you,” Asha said.

“Oh, it’s okay, I don’t mind answering...she was always so quiet...and there was something very pure about her...I guess I was drawn to her because a lot of the other interns were afraid to talk to her...I looked at it as a challenge...and it looks like I won...”

Anthony rocked her back and forth and she eyed Brandon momentarily, whose lips were now tighter than before. He took another sip of beer.

“Hell, every man, whether or not they admit it, wants a good girl on their arm...”

Natalie aimlessly pieced over her meal, and she was so distracted that she didn't notice the rapport that Scotty was developing with her boyfriend in a short span of time. She neglected to think about the fact that both of them were insanely into music and could talk for days about it. Natalie only resolved to sit the remainder of the meal in silence, as she realized it would be difficult to get rid of them now, no matter how much she and Brandon detested being this close together. Or could she only speak for herself...?

Later, she and Asha trailed down a sidewalk, while the boys trailed behind.

“You do realize that this can never happen again, right?”

“Don't be overdramatic...yes, Brandon is back in town... yes, he's walking behind us...yes, he's probably looking at your ass while your boyfriend is standing beside him...but it's not the end of the world...we're going to do what we always do...s-cour these galleries for free wine and dessert, dance while we're tipsy, and go home happy people...”

She laughed. Asha made it sound so easy.

But somewhere in between the first gallery stop and the fourth, Anthony and Scotty had gone to see the street band

early, and Asha ran into one of her ex-boyfriends, leaving her alone. She didn't mind it though; she often enjoyed blending in with the rest of society, viewing art like normal people, who probably weren't going through as many emotional roller coasters as she was, who woke up happy and went to bed happy with the same person each day.

She lingered in one particular gallery which had a series of black and white photographs on display. They depicted dissimilar types of people, of different ages and colors and sizes. She assumed the message was that at the end of the day everyone was the same, no matter where they came from.

Natalie scoffed out loud, momentarily forgetting that she wasn't alone.

She heard the street band start up another tune and as she started for the exit, she saw Brandon enter. She knew that he hadn't followed her; he looked just as surprised as she did. But in a flash, she turned in the other direction, and started for the back of the gallery, praying for another exit, praying that the crowd became thick enough to hide her. She then wished that Anthony hadn't left her. She could've used him as a safeguard.

Did that sound terrible or what?

She promised him that she'd never run away from him again, that she'd stand up to him and tell exactly what she felt but her throbbing heartbeat distracted her, scared her, and she was certain that he was trailing closely behind her. It was only a matter of time before he caught up with her.

There was a back display room where they'd placed the regular artwork, and she dawdled there with no way out. Seconds later, there he stood.

"What could you possibly have to say to me? Huh?" she told him. He only stared at her.

"Stop running from me," he replied quietly.

"Stop chasing me..."

"There you are! Do you know how many galleries I went into looking for you?"

She didn't know how Anthony found her, but she didn't care. All she could feel was relief.

"Come on, baby, they're going to play our song..."

She honestly didn't know they had one...

She danced with Anthony as if they were alone; she wasn't embarrassed, and she attempted not to notice Brandon staring at her as he danced with Asha. But as she snuck a glance in his direction, she was glad that Asha actually managed to make him smile, if only temporarily. She was glad to see her closest friends together again, and part of her wished she and Brandon had never taken that leap. They could've been just as happy as friends – maybe happier than they were as lovers. She then thought that maybe they were only meant to stay in a platonic state, and maybe after some time had elapsed, her stronger feelings would drift away as easily as they'd come and she could lean on him the way that she used to.

But the wishful thinking made her anxious...

In that moment, she remembered how fun it was dancing with Anthony. They moved together in impeccable rhythmic harmony and she loved feeling her reservations fall by the wayside. It reminded her of how alike and gentle and attentive he was. If he had won a challenge by dating her, then maybe she had too. She could see the finish line up ahead – perhaps it was possible to overcome her aching pain. Perhaps it was actually possible to move on – even when her past was ogling her from across a vacant parking lot.

The band started a slow tempo number, and Scotty offered to cut in, after dancing with a series of nameless, faceless females. Anthony obliged and stood off to the side after planting a sweet wet kiss on her cheek.

Scotty wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in close.

"Ah, I missed this," he told her, chuckling a little.

"I did too," she replied. "Until you almost embarrassed me..."

"Oh, Nat, live a little," he said rolling his eyes. "We probably won't ever see your boyfriend again after tonight...though I see why you'd date him. He seems like a pretty alright guy..."

"Thanks...I guess..."

"Needless to say, I'm biased...but..."

"I catch your drift," she replied. "Just don't do any dumb stuff like that again. You and Asha shouldn't have subjected

him to that. I don't know what I would do if I had to sit at dinner with his new girlfriend...I'd be sick..."

"Well, I'm staying out of it from now on," he replied, sighing. "But it sucks, though..."

"What does?"

"Out of all the girls he's dated in the past, you're the only one I actually really liked. You're the only one that I really wanted him to stick with..."

She leaned in and kissed Scotty's cheek gingerly. "Thanks, Scott...but Brandy did what he wanted to do...and I'm going to do the same...I can't make a person a priority if they can't do the same for me..."

Scotty pulled away from her slowly, and Anthony arrived by her side promptly.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

"They need me to sit in on this emergency surgery...there was an accident on Plymouth...something like a five-car pileup. I have to go as soon as possible..."

Asha approached them then.

"Asha, do you mind taking Natalie home? I have to go back to the hospital..."

"I would but, I rode with Scotty..."

"I'll take Natalie home," Scotty began. "If she asks nicely..."

"Scotty..."

"Yes, I can take you home..."

She sat on the sidewalk while her friends danced a little longer, and she was glad that Brandon kept his distance. Then an unforeseen rainfall shattered the party, and dozens of people were scrambling to get to their cars as the clock approached midnight. And she and Asha held hands as they trailed behind the boys, and she attempted to search through dim lighting for Scotty's SUV. Instead, they stopped just before a green Explorer with the familiar license plate and the familiar scratch on the back bumper where he'd accidentally hit a tree when they went on a picnic a couple of summers ago.

"Scotty, I thought you said that you drove?"

"Well...technically, yea, I did...Brandon wanted to finish a sandwich he'd made before we left the house so I told him I'd drive..."

But it was Brandon who now silently made his way to the driver's side of the truck. She hesitantly climbed into the backseat, soaking wet.

She focused on remaining as stubbornly quiet as possible, but it only livened her other senses, that made her notice the things she'd forgotten about or stifled: the smell of his car, the way it squeaked when he turned the corner, the way he always forgot to turn on the defroster whenever it rained, the way he always played something haunting and acoustic whenever he had something weighing down on him. She expected Scotty to comment on its melancholic tone, but he never said anything.

Part of her wished he'd stop at her apartment first. She desperately wanted to separate herself from the situation as soon as possible. But she knew that her wishful thinking would get her soon enough...

He pulled into the driveway of the house on Trent road and was relieved when she didn't see the baby blue BMW parked outside. Maybe the mysterious brunette had been a disheartening delusion she'd concocted in her head so that she wouldn't have to get out of the car...or maybe she was just as real as Asha had said. Scotty proceeded to get out of the car, but Asha remained seated. She innately grabbed her friend's hand, startling her.

"Ash, you promised we'd played spades when we got back, remember?" Scotty reminded her. Asha hesitated for a moment, then caught wind of what he was talking about. She hated when they treated her as though she were a fool.

"I'm coming too," Natalie offered as she started to open her door.

"No," Asha shot back, surprising her, "You should go home...Anthony will be there in no time...Scotty will drive me back when we're done playing..."

She wanted to protest more, but she didn't feel like causing more drama than necessary. This was one of hundreds of times that she'd been in Brandon's car, and the ten minute ride home wouldn't kill her – she just hoped it was the last time she had to do so.

She lingered in the backseat, but realized that Brandon hadn't moved, even after Scotty and Asha had gone into the house. And she caught him eyeing her from the rearview mirror.

"What?"

"I'm not a chauffeur, Natalie," he said bluntly. "Get your ass in the front seat."

She purposely hesitated, until his eyes widened. The rain grew more menacing, and a crackle of thunder resonated the length of the sky. She climbed in the passenger seat beside him, and trembled when the thunder snarled again.

He chuckled hollowly, as he backed out of the driveway. "I remember when you used to be so scared of thunderstorms. The first time you screamed, you were so embarrassed. Each time after that you begged me to hold you until it was over..."

"Yes, and then you proceeded to yell at me for waking you up, and then you'd roll back over and go back to sleep...I remember that perfectly..."

She watched as he pursed his lips, and murmured, "I've grown quite used to you leaving me hanging, though...considering it a second skin..."

"That's all you ever did, Tallie," he heckled, shaking his head. "You criticized me; you pointed out the negative parts of our relationship...you never focused on how great it really was...how close we really were..."

"Don't make me the bad guy in this scenario, Brandon," she replied.

“How can I not? Nothing I ever did was good enough for you. Loving you wasn’t enough...always being there wasn’t enough...”

She shook her head violently. She could feel the muscles in her throat begin to constrict.

“Don’t make me the enemy,” she replied, quietly. Suddenly, she was winded.

“I wasn’t the one that left,” she continued. “I wasn’t the one who gave up on our relationship...if you were having problems with me you should’ve told me...you should’ve told me like you always told me...don’t you dare sit there and say it’s my fault that you left. You left me in the middle of the night, while I was passed out drunk. If you cared about me at all, you would’ve talked to me about it. We would’ve worked it out. We would have been fine today. It wasn’t over for me...”

She realized that his agitation was progressing; he was accelerating much more than he should have on that dark, narrow road.

“And now I’m over it...now I’ve moved on...and you can’t stand it...you can’t stand it at all...”

“If you’ve moved on, what was that on the beach in Clearwater, Tal, huh? Why did we kiss? Why did you come and meet me at all?”

She couldn’t think of an answer that could satisfy him; because she didn’t know why she did it. At that moment, she only went off of what she felt – seeing Brandon in the cascading silhouette, smelling his cologne, reveling in the magnitude of his

strength, as the self-conscious, anxious side of herself drifted into the sea.

She rolled her eyes closed. That moment was surreal, and should only exist on a plane where her imaginative side would always long for Brandon to set her burdensome mind free.

“I don’t know,” she babbled earnestly. “I don’t know what I feel anymore...I’m hollow, I’m misplaced...you’re all that I...you’re all that I ever wanted to feel...you’re all that I ever needed...”

He pulled into a space in front of her apartment building and killed the engine. The rain knocked zealously against the windows.

“Tal,” he whispered. “You can’t keep punishing me...I’ve told you countless times how sorry I am...I made a fool out of you and out of myself...and you’re trying to alienate yourself from me...and it’s killing me, baby...it’s killing me that I can’t...I can’t...”

His voice trailed off, and he directed his eyes toward his window.

“I’m the one that’s been punished, Brandy,” she whispered. She could feel the tears climb her throat now. “I’ll never know what it feels like to love again. Because I’ll never be able to love any man as much as I loved you. No feeling will ever come close. And you’ll always haunt me, and as long as I’m with Anthony it’ll never be fair to him. I’ll never be capable of giving him my whole self...because [she began to stammer through her words as the first tear fell]...because you will al-

ways have all of me [she pauses for a moment to let the initial cry roll through her, and then she continues]. I didn't know how to love, but I did the best I could. And I wanted to give you everything of me...my mind, my heart, my soul, my body...and you couldn't wait for me..."

They sit in silence for a few moments, and Natalie wipes the tears from her eyes. Brandon avoids her eyes.

"I'd thought about it for weeks," she whispered, sniffing gently. "I wanted it to be a surprise [she begins to laugh]. But I couldn't decide if I wanted to tell you or if I would just pounce on you and take it from there..."

"What are you talking about, Natalie?"

"I was ready that night, Brandy," she whispered, the sob, lingering in her voice. "I was ready to kiss my virginity goodbye that night. I was so...I was so in love with you, Brandy...I'd never felt something so real and tangible in my life...and I was ready to love you in every possible way I could...you'd waited so long for me and you deserved me...you never pressured me...you never...damn it..."

"I didn't know, Tal..."

"You just had to up the ante, didn't you? You couldn't take it a step at a time, could you?"

She then shook her head vigorously, sloppily wiping the remainder of her tears away. "Well, it's done with now...it's over...I'm over it...I have to go..."

"Let me walk you up..."

"No..."

"It's after midnight..."

"I've gone almost two years without you...I think I can last twenty seconds..."

And she stormed out of the car.

...

Natalie furiously raced up the stairs to the third floor and fumbled for her keys. The rain on her face muddled the tear drops, sitting complacently on her cheeks.

She entered the dark, quiet apartment and turned her back to the door. She desperately attempted to catch her breath as the thunder clapped against the windows. But her mind had trapped her body in a bizarre way, and had constricted its basic functions. And she could only dawdle in the shadows, as the carvings in the door evanesced with her taut back.

And then there was a quiet knock on the door seconds later, startling her, numbing the disquieting calm she'd previously felt mantle her. She turned around unhurriedly and gingerly turned the knob. Brandon stood behind it, his head lowered, drenched, sloppily pressed into the doorjamb. Weakness enthralled his eyes.

She felt her insides dissolve.

"Brandy...don't...just go...please...I can't fight you anymore..."

But as he lunged at her and grabbed her face, she didn't stop him. She was numb to consequence and thought; she could only sense and feel and breathe Brandon as he fervently pressed his lips into hers and hiked her up, hooking her legs around his narrow waist.

He kicked the door closed behind him, and pressed her back against the corridor wall as the thunder clapped again, as he ravenously claimed her thighs with his hands, as he pushed his pelvis into the space between her knees. She pulled her wet chignon loose, and buried her fingers in his nebulous hair, pulling and pinching and caressing.

And she parted from him, as her stringy hair dangled in her face. She pinched at his cheek, tilting it upward, studying him, eyeing him gravely.

"Tell me that you love me," she murmured, moving her lips close to his.

"God, I love you, baby," he whispered distraughtly in reply.

"Then make love to me, please..."

He hiked her up once more, and carried her down that corridor. His eyes never left her face. She melted like putty in his custody. He kicked open her bedroom door, and dropped her on the soft mattress. He lifted her legs up and removed her flip-flops, one by one. And he dropped them to the floor, and he individualized each of her ten toes, kissing them as if each one of them mattered in their own special way. She giggled a little.

The lids of his eyes were heavy, and he often licked his lips as his eyes traveled the length of her body.

He returned her legs and reached at the hem of his t-shirt, pulling it over his head swiftly.

Every part of her body trembled, but everything part of it felt right. She chose not to think about tomorrow or hearing from Anthony or seeing what the real world would feel like again. She only wanted Brandon to make her feel whole again.

He tugged at his belt and loosened it easily, and she watched as his jeans dropped to the floor quickly. She then stood to her feet and pushed her romper down her body, kicking it off as it settled on the floor. Brandon was smiling down at her as the tips of her fingers traced the lines in his pectoral muscles, his abs, stalling on the strip of black curly hair attached to his abdomen. He sucked in his breath as he grabbed her chin and kissed her again, heavier and deeper this time, gracefully lowering down on her back. They both crawl toward the headboard and lay flat, and he settles easily between her. Her nerves are low and he makes her feel comfortable. She hooks her arms around his neck, and he smiles down at her again. Her delicate fingers crawl down his sides and begin to push his boxers downward as his lips find a gentle curve in her neck.

The sound of her cellular phone ring scares her initially but she chooses to ignore it. When it rings again, Brandon grows distracted and rolls off of her with frustration, pounding his fists into the mattress.

“It’s him,” he mumbles through clenched teeth. She slides off the bed and goes into the living room to answer it, shutting the door behind her.

“Yes?”

“Babe, are you awake?”

“Barely...”

“I’m done earlier than I thought. The surgery was a success. There were no fatalities.”

She always loved hearing Anthony get excited about saving lives. It made him seem more human in a way.

“That’s good, darling...”

“I won’t disturb you tonight. I just wanted to tell you goodnight. How about I pick you up for breakfast tomorrow morning?”

“That sounds good...”

“Ok, goodnight, Natalie, I love you...”

“I love you too, Ant...”

She replaces her phone and turns around, eager to return to the bedroom and continue. But Brandon is looming in the eerie shadow, fully dressed. He appears weakened in some way, and she can’t shake the feeling she gets just by looking at him.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m leaving,” he sighs. “I can’t do this. I can’t be that guy...”

“What guy?”

“He’ll always know you better than me...he’ll always have the upper hand, because he’s spent time with your family, he’s

seen where you come from. You two will always share something biological that I’ll never be able to understand or compete with. I think deep down, you were always waiting for that person you could take home to your family, who you wouldn’t be ashamed of. And even if you don’t agree with me now, you’ll always know that you made the right choice by being with him instead of me, because you’re constantly seeking comfort. You’ll eventually have sex with him, and you’ll eventually marry him, and I always be the guy you kept secret from everyone. I’ll always come in second place. And I’ll never be able to deal with not being with you the right way. You’ll sleep with me tonight, and you’ll run back to him tomorrow and that’ll be the end of us. I’d never hide you; I’d never feel ashamed of you. I loved you just that much...”

She feels the anger swell up in her again and she refuses to let it subside as he walks past her, towards the door.

“Brandon David Greene, if you leave here...this will be the last time I forgive you...”

She begins to tear up and she’s sure that he can see it clearly. But he turns the knob and walks out anyway...

After meeting Anthony for a quick breakfast the following morning, she returned to her apartment to find Asha sitting on the couch waiting for her.

She patted the space next to her gently.

“I take it you’re just getting in,” Natalie suspected, placing her bottom next to her friend’s. She didn’t get much sleep the night before, and the coffee at breakfast didn’t help either. She

could think of nothing more than crawling in her bed and going back to sleep in an attempt to forget yesterday.

“Yes, I left right as Brandon was pulling into the driveway this morning,” she replied, smiling. “I figured I’d give you guys plenty of time to work things out. Scotty was skeptical but I knew all along that Brandon wouldn’t come right back from dropping you off. It’s not like him.”

“Apparently he went elsewhere to ‘work things out’ after he left here...he didn’t spend the night...”

“Well what the hell happened then?”

“Do I really have to talk about it?” Natalie groaned, laying the length of the couch with exasperation.

“Yes, it’s better if you do,” Asha reminded her. “You can’t keep these things bottled up inside of you forever...”

Natalie shook her head and paused before she spoke. “We had it out in the car not too long after we left the house...”

“Yea, and...?”

“And he tried to blame me for him leaving,” she replied slowly. “And I told him...I told him that I’d never love anyone as much as I loved him...”

“Aw, that’s sweet...”

Natalie kicked her lightly.

“And I told him that I wanted to give him my virginity the night that he left me...and that I’ve essentially been screwed up ever since...”

“And that was it?”

“No...he wanted to walk me upstairs, but I refused him, and I told him that I didn’t need him. But he followed me upstairs anyway...”

“That’s my Brandon...” Asha jeered.

“And I told him to leave...of course he didn’t listen...and he proceeded to kiss me...”

“Go on, go on...”

“I got so excited that I forgot about how angry I was at him...I just wanted him...because I knew that he wanted me just as much...do I really have to finish...?”

“Yes...go on, please...”

“And I begged him to...I begged him to...oh my God this is embarrassing...”

“Begged him to what, Nat?”

“I literally begged him to make love to me...and we started to...we got so hot and heavy and we were almost at the point of penetration...I wasn’t nervous, I was so comfortable...and he looked so happy...and then...then my phone rings and it’s Anthony...I leave the bedroom to answer it and when I get done, he’s standing in the living room with his clothes on, saying that he can’t do it. Saying that he refuses to come in second place...and then he leaves...”

“Wow...you should call him...”

“He probably doesn’t want anything to do with me...and I told him that if he left I wouldn’t forgive him again...we’re done, Ash...we’re really done...”

The following week, she took a double shift at the hospital and came home late. She told Anthony to stay at his place that night; she needed just a tinge of space. She'd stopped by the store on the way home and grabbed another couple of bottles of wine. She chose the grocery store nearest to Trent road; his truck was parked outside and so was the baby blue BMW. She sped off and returned home swiftly. She was alone again. Asha had gone out of town to visit her family for the weekend, and she decided to take a bath. She poured a glass of wine and sunk into the tub, leaving the bottle beside it. Her body is still but her mind is alive, and she obsessively mulls over a series of scenarios in her head:

Maybe she's a distant cousin, visiting for the summer...maybe she's a coworker that's helping him out on a major project...maybe she's with Scotty...and he's given her the key...maybe it's just sex...maybe it's not real...maybe he doesn't care about her at all...

She's gone through her fourth glass of wine, and her skin is severely pruned. And for reasons unknown to her, she began to sob, and she can feel it in every inch of her body. She placed the glass down, climbed out of the tub, and headed into her bedroom, wrapping a towel around her as she reached for her phone. She returned, stumbling into the room, slumping down beside the bathtub. She dialed a series of numbers, but only heard a series of droning rings and then voicemail...

She cried harder then into the receiver, and murmured his name over and over again, beating her head with the palm of her hand.

"I was stupid," she said. "I was so stupid...I'm being stupid now...I still love you...I still love you...I really do...I...I always will...just come back...just come back, please..."

...

But she heard nothing else from him for days, and she realized that she'd yet to admit that it was over to herself, even if she chanted it aloud for the entire world to hear. She stopped making spontaneous stops by the house on Trent road. She had sufficiently embarrassed herself.

But Anthony seemed completely oblivious to the changes that were going on with her. He only talked about how great his job was, and how he'd gotten in real well with the administration. She was glad that he'd put the proposal of moving in together on the back-burner for the time being.

She was distracted enough at work to the point where the nurses questioned her daily. She couldn't for the life of her, come up with a better answer that would make her seem less affected. She was zombie, walking in the place of a person who once used to have every facet of herself together. Now what had she become?

She and Anthony were in her bedroom watching a movie when they heard a peculiar knock on the door. It was well past

eleven, and while she had to get up in the morning to take on a full day of research in the hospital library, he had to work a full day, then catch a flight to Charleston for a pediatric conference.

“I wonder who that could be?” she asked, sitting up.

“Stay here,” he told her. “I’ll go see...”

She watched Anthony disappear into the living room, but she couldn’t hear a thing. She prayed that it wasn’t a crazed lunatic who had nothing better to do than to terrorize young unsuspecting people. But he returned a few moments later, shutting the door behind him, climbing into bed.

“Who was that?”

He looked confused, but clarity illuminated his face quickly thereafter. “It was that Brandon guy...he said that Asha forgot something at his house the other night, and he thought he would return it.”

“Really...?”

“Yea, it was a strange exchange,” he continued. “He seemed really put off by the fact that I opened the door. And I think he may have been a little drunk...”

Natalie took a deep breath. “What did Asha leave?”

“Some kind of dragonfly necklace,” he replied. “Apparently it’s been over there for quite some time and he got up enough courage to finally bring it over. He said that she’d know what to do with it...”

“Strange...”

“I’d say so,” he sighed. “I just left it on the kitchen counter. I think he might have a thing for Asha...”

Chapter 13

THE LETTER



SHE WATCHED ANT walk through the gate of the Atlanta airport, small duffel tossed over his shoulder, glancing back at her only once, to smile and to wink at her.

He was going out of town for a week to a pediatric conference in Charleston. He had offered an invitation for her to come along, but she declined, of course, opting to stay in Athens. She wanted to enjoy the peace, hoping that it was just long enough for her to breathe, long enough to miss him, and love him more when he was away, actually need him.

For that moment, she tried not to remember the note that had been attached to the dragonfly pendant that Brandon had returned to Asha. She tried not to remember the conversation that occurred in the kitchen once Anthony had alerted her of what Brandon had done.

She'd looked at him so curiously, arching her eyebrow as she sat at the round kitchen table.

Anthony explained the situation in the best way he knew how.

"He just showed up," he said, pouring himself another cup of coffee.

Why wouldn't he have taken an earlier flight? Natalie hovered over the stove, tossing eggs with a spatula. She slyly and frequently glanced over at the pendant, ogling it from the countertop. She felt she couldn't breathe.

"He was drunk but he knew exactly what he was doing," he continued. "'Give this to Asha,' he said, 'She'll know exactly what to do with it!'"

Asha cleared her throat. "And what was it again?"

"A dragonfly necklace...it's a real gaudy sort of thing.. he said you left it over there quite some time ago and he just got the courage to bring it back over.."

"Hmmm," Asha returned. "I don't recall a dragonfly necklace of any kind..."

When Anthony turned his back toward them, she then took the opportunity to shoot her eyes in Natalie's direction and widen them a little. Natalie only shook her head as quickly and as vigorously as she could.

"Sure you do, Ash," Natalie returned quickly. "You remember when Brandon bought that pendant for your twentieth birthday? You remember? We went to Lake Hartwell and stayed in that cabin for the weekend?"

Asha pursed her lips. "I remember going to the lake...but I'm not sure..."

"You remember, crazy, because you told me it freaked you out that he bought you something like that so soon...remember I told you I could tell he really cared about you?"

"Sure..."

"There's a note, Ash," Anthony said, picking up the folded piece of paper. "Why don't you read that...maybe that'll jog your memory..."

Asha sighed heavily as she slowly unfolded the paper, clearing her throat before she read it aloud:

She felt her throat burn, and she attempted to quickly

stifle the emotion as Asha glared at her.

"Well, it's good to finally know how he feels," she said nonchalantly, tossing the paper aside. "Well that's done..."

"Asha, the man poured his heart out to you," Anthony said. "How can you be so cold? And who is 'T'?"

Asha bounced her shoulders up and down. "It's all about choices, Ant," she said. "Making good ones and bad ones...he was saying goodbye...and I made the choice to accept this...no matter how much I love him...I made a bad choice not to love Brandon. Oh! And Taylor is my middle name...who else?"

Natalie swallowed thickly as Anthony came toward her.

"Well, good thing I don't have to worry about that," he said, pressing his lips into the side of her face. "What we have is solid...isn't that right, baby?"

...

T. -

We don't choose who we love. It just kind of happens. We can blame fate or whatever, but something up above is pointing us toward each other and our feelings just go along with it. I have no regrets about my feelings toward you - I only regret how I handled it. Take this, and if we never see each other again, don't ever forget what we shared.

Brandy

That night, it rained, hard against the window of her bedroom, and she lay on her bed, body cast in darkness, a bundle of candles lit around the room; the sound of the pellets beating against the glass, soothing her ears.

She'd just gotten off the phone with Anthony, had just enjoyed the calm in his voice, the way he said that he loved her. But knew somewhere in the back of her mind, on instance, that staying with him made sense, that somewhere deep down inside of her would allow her to love him as much as he loved her one day. She decided then that she had a choice to make, and fast.

She knew that staying with Anthony posed stability, a life of security, a promise of the future, though, luckily enough for her heart and her mental state, they had not discussed a solid future together, as if Ant sensed her fears, as if Ant, who luckily had no clue of Brandon's significance, knew that a piece of her heart still lingered elsewhere.

Brandon's presence bred fantasy, idealism, instability...though she romanticized his strength, his intelligence, them as an item made less sense (no sense!), was the birthplace of all of her fears.

But oh, there was something about Brandon, yes? There would always be something about Brandon. There was life, there was breath, there was connection...but then there were the differences...yes, the subtle ones that were just enough to make her look at him differently...just enough.

She reached for her cellular phone, conveniently placed by her side, dialed the first number of his that came to her mind.

The line connected, a low voice answered on the other end. Natalie swallowed her pride down hard in the sound of the rain, and whispered, “Brandon, I need to see you...”

...

She was nervous and she had every right to be.

She sat at a small round table at a café across from Lennox Square, and all she could think about was how much Brandon used to like the pancakes there or the fact that she’d purposely screened three out of the five calls that Anthony had delivered, as she anxiously waited on the green Explorer to pull up. She didn’t need any distractions what she wanted to do in this situation. She wanted it to be painless and sweet – but she figured that neither one of those would occur.

She ordered water with lemon and he, a sweet tea, as the familiar image of his truck pulled up along the curb. Every nerve in her hands rattled at the sight of him, pulling his shades away from his eyes and plugging them into the collar of his crisp grey t-shirt. He said down across from her, and placed his keys on the ground. She avoided his eye contact, but she could feel his eyes ardently placed on hers.

She internally admitted that she’d forgotten how handsome he could be in his simplicity, and every other part of her, besides her burdensome mind, wanted to reach across the table and envelop him in her arms. But she resisted the urge and took another long sip of water.

He picked up his own drink. “I guess there are some things you never forget,” he murmured, pressing his lips against the glass.

“Stop it, Brandy,” she replied.

“Why are you so nervous?” he asked her. “Aren’t you the one who asked me to lunch? Shouldn’t I be the one that’s nervous?”

“You’re never nervous,” she reminded him. “When’s the last you were nervous about something...”

“I can think of a couple of times,” he admitted. “But this meeting isn’t about me...so I’ll let you continue...”

“I don’t know where to begin...”

“Let’s start with why you called me up in the first place,” he said. “Or why you drunkenly called me the other night? Or why...”

“It’s probably the same reason why you returned that pendant, or you wrote that note attached with it...”

He pursed his lips and remained silent.

“Exactly,” she sighed. “I thought my reasoning for asking you to meet with me should go without saying...”

“Maybe I just wanted a semblance of closure,” he responded bluntly. “Which you have yet to give me...”

“And I...? What about me? Don’t I deserve some closure...?”

“Is that what this meeting is about, Tal? If so, then let’s get it over with,” he told her. She flinched at the flicker of frostiness that was glazed across his expression.

“You were the one who said you’d never forgive me,” he reminded her quietly, taking a cue from her silence. “You were the one that said you’d never speak to me again. You never wanted to see me again. Shouldn’t you be glad that I’ve finally managed to return the sentiment? We’ve dragged this thing on long enough...tell me what you have to tell me so that we can finally fucking move on with our lives...I’ve stopped thinking about you, I’ve stopped caring about you...so why haven’t you done the same...?”

She couldn’t stop the formation of feeling from brimming her eyes as she watched him arrogantly flop back in his seat with lackadaisical ease. He looked so unaffected and it bothered her. She caught her fallen tear with her finger, slapped her napkin down on the tabletop and removed herself, mumbling, “You asshole,” as she stormed away from the restaurant.

She fumbled in her purse for her keys as she moved across the street in the direction of her car, but she’d forgotten where she’d parked, and she couldn’t remember if she’d even put her

keys in her purse at all or if she’d even tipped the waitress for the water. She was only conveniently attempting to shove the dozens of memories that she and Brandon had had at that restaurant out of her head as she simultaneously attempted to shove the visualization of Brandon’s dispassionate eyes out of her head. And as she finally caught hold to her keys, she began to imagine herself as the new Sophia, a woman who’d been used by Brandon and shoveled aside with the rest of the trash.

Another tear fell as she reached her car, and she fought for breath as her head became light. And just as she began to open the car door, a hand caught her arm and swung her around.

Brandon pulled her into him, forcing an embrace around her.

“I didn’t mean it,” he whispered. “I swear to God, baby, I didn’t mean it...”

She wriggled out of his grasp, sniffing as she turned away from him.

“Well, you said it,” she reminded him. He pressed himself up against her, grabbing at her arms to steady her.

“I’m just as frustrated as you are,” he whispered against her cheek. He squeezed her arms a little tighter; she tried her hardest not to become putty in his grapple.

“I look at you, and I’m fucking pissed, Tallie,” he continued. “I’m pissed because I want you so badly...and I can’t have you...I can’t have all of you the way I want...”

She only cried pathetically in his vicinity. She felt weak and useless as her fingers allowed her keys to clamor to the ground.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” he suggested, pressing his lips into her ear once. “Somewhere we can be alone...no distractions...”

“I don’t want to go back to your house, Brandon,” he told him.

“I had another place in mind,” he replied. “Just get in my car...”

She hesitantly slid into the passenger seat, watching her sweet Athens pass her by. But there wasn’t a single moment where she felt imprisoned by him, to the point where she couldn’t escape. She was no longer the childlike curious being that she once was; what had replaced her was someone who was far more comfortable being sneaky and deceitful. And for the moment, she had chosen to exist only in fantasy land, where she and Brandon coexisted congenially without fault or negativity.

He gently pulled away from the curb, and her mind was set at surprising ease, but her heart remained relentlessly guarded, and she tried to think about where he might take her. The roads he took were only vaguely familiar, but she quickly lost interest. Her senses had come alive: the sight of being in Brandon’s car again, the smell of the date pineapple air freshe-ner dangling from the rearview mirror, the sound of the Goo Goo Dolls, playing effortlessly from a stereo that hasn’t lost its original sound.

The truck drifted off the road, and settled onto a rocky bridle path, cradled gently by the verdant leaves of fully grown trees. Ahead of them was nothing but an open meadow of wildflowers, tall golden grass, and copious sunshine. Brandon killed the engine and told her to exit the car. She followed suit easily.

“Brandon, where are we?” she asked him coyly, scrutinizing the field under blinding light.

“You don’t remember?”

She shook her head earnestly.

“You were a freshman,” he began, inching closer to her. “You were barely eighteen. We took a philosophy class together second semester, and you swore you wanted nothing to do with me outside of class. But I somehow convinced you to come with me and Scotty to Halley’s in Atlanta for a night, and to this day, I still can’t believe you agreed. But you got angry with me once you found out that I was trying to hook you up with Scotty. But if you only knew why I did it...I just wanted to be closer to you. I just wanted to know you better. After we dropped Scotty off, you agreed to take a ride with me. I took you to this very same field, Tal, so that we could talk. And I realized then that I cared about you way more than I should have at the time.”

Natalie laughed in disbelief. “It looks so different in the daytime...and it’s a lot warmer too...”

Brandon retrieved a blanket from the back of his car and draped it over the wild grass. They both settled down easily.

She sat in reflective silence beside him, cradling her knees in her arms, taking one deep breath after the other. She wasn't certain of what she wanted to say or how she wanted to say it, but sitting this close to Brandon and not feeling every part of her insides curl was something she wasn't particularly used to. And she assumed he wasn't either.

She resorted to staring straight ahead of her, watching the sun slip beneath watchful clouds and reappear again, remembering just what it felt like to be in the servitude of benevolent silence, if only for a little while. Their shoulders touched and she felt a glint of bliss roll through her fluently.

"I always thought," Brandon began, taking a deep sigh. "That when we came back to this spot we'd still be just as secure as the day before or the month before or the year before...but I guess it shows just how confusing our lives can be in a matter of seconds..."

She nodded compliantly.

"I don't ever think I was fully willing to own up to my mistakes because I was still so angry," he admitted. "I guess it was hard for me to accept that you could actually move on so easily. I'd created this illusion in my head that you'd struggle just as much as I did..."

"I guess in the beginning I started dating Anthony out of spite," she replied earnestly. "I wanted to forget about you in the quickest, easiest, painless way and Anthony presented me with that opportunity. I wanted to leave him as soon as I felt better, as soon I stopped loving you. But then we connected in

a way that I didn't expect, as if I was meant to give him a chance. He treated me like a princess, and in all aspects he seemed so right for me. We both seemed to be heading steadfast in the right direction and that always appealed to me. He reminds me of home. And I'll never be able to break that connection to him."

Brandon didn't readily respond, as if he were soaking in every word she spoke to him. She could see him staring downward out of the corner of her eye.

"So I guess, in a way," she continued. "I was able to move on without you...and that was very hard for me to do..."

She knew that she sounded robotic and icy, but she couldn't think of a better way to get her point across. She then desperately attempted to not get swept away by her surroundings; but it was only a matter of time before she gave up the fight out of weakness...or something else.

She could sense a peculiar type of tension that stirred inside of Brandon at the peak of their collective silence, but she couldn't remedy the sensation. And then he got to his feet as she urgently searched for a resolution. He travelled down a shallow slope slowly with his hands clamped to his head, staring skyward. She followed suit.

She approached him from behind and wriggled her arms around his waist, clamping her hands together on the other side. She settled her face against his back, and felt his every inhale and exhale.

“You go to college totally uncertain of who you are and where you’re going,” he began quietly. “And then there’s those few people you meet who change your life in the process...they can either be toxic or beneficial...but it’s only after some time and maturity that you realize their significance, the relativity...”

She squeezed him tighter.

“I may have made some mistakes, Tallie, but none of them included loving you with all that I had inside of me...I can rest each night confident in the idea that I’d never stopped loving you, that I’d never stopped thinking about you...you were always different from the rest...you were always far more special...and...and...I genuinely felt something real for you...and whether or not you believe that is up to you...”

She chuckled vacantly. “I always believed that, Brandy...that wasn’t the point...”

He then turned to her. “Then tell me what it was...”

“I can’t,” she replied sincerely. “This isn’t right, Brandon...”

“Everything is right about this, Tallie,” he retorted. “That’s what you can’t understand. Everything about us is right...you just have to believe in us, baby...you just have to believe that we can make it work again...”

She heard his voice splinter and it melted her.

“You’re everything that I want out of life...I can’t...I don’t make any fucking sense without you...you have to understand, Natalie...you have to...you have to...”

She shuddered as his eyes’ scrutiny filled her internal vacancy. And she dizzily watched his hair move against the breeze. She didn’t want to admit that a certain portion of her had always feared him, and she couldn’t determine if it was reverence or something far more sinister. She took a deep breath before him, and allowed him to tuck a flying strand of her black hair behind her ear. She knew that her susceptibility was exposed, but she prayed that he didn’t take advantage of it. She prayed that he only cradled it...

She tried to stop the tear, but it came anyway, and it slid down her cheek unreservedly for him to see plainly. And she released her rigid breath and attempted to back away demurely. But he caught her promptly with one arm and wrangled her into him again. He moved close to her face with his own, and she brushed the tip of her nose against his, as his protracted gaze lulled her into a stupor. She smelled his nearness, and the tepid warmth from his parted lips attracted her eyes to the vicinity much longer than she wanted it to.

And she pushed her lips into his slowly as her fingers dawdled along his jaw, following the curve of his ear, and the wave of his lengthy ebony hair.

And in seconds the kiss was over, and she moved away from him, back toward the blanket, sitting down once more. She cradled her knees in her arms’ embrace and rocked back and forth with perplexity slathered across her face.

He sat down next to her.

“I don’t do this,” she told him, her eyes forced before her.

“I know this,” he replied confidently.

Then she looked at him. “Then why do you have to make this hard for me?”

“I’m not trying to, Natalie,” he told her. “I know you feel everything that I’m feeling...”

“You don’t understand,” she replied, shaking her head. “I’m trying not to have these feelings...I’m trying to say good-bye to you...”

“You don’t have to say goodbye,” he replied. “We can give this another chance...”

“You’re diluted,” she snapped. “You’re diluted if you think I can just waltz back into my life and pretend as if nothing’s happened...”

He sighed regressively. “I just want you to look at me the same way you did back then, Tallie...before all of this happened...”

She shook her head defiantly. “I can’t, Brandon...I can’t... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at you the same way...too much has happened between us now...”

He didn’t respond. She fought back the tears.

“Tell me one thing...”

He glanced in her direction, waiting for her to continue.

“Why did you go back to her?” she muttered. “Was she worth it? Huh? Was she better than me? Did she kiss better than me? Was her touch better than mine? You don’t know how many nights I stayed up after I left Clearwater, thinking of the ways that you touched her, wondering if you still loved

her the same way you did back then, wondering if she was it for you. If she was the real reason why you left me...I was so hurt, and so angry, and so confused...you’re a selfish, selfish bastard...and I’m hate it...and I hate you...I really do...I hate...”

He didn’t let her finish. He grabbed her face in his hands and he kissed her again, but she didn’t stop him. They only lay down on the blanket together like two jaded puppies after a long day of playing in the backyard. He moved his body close to hers and flashes of what their relationship used to be fluttered before her eyes making her grow dizzy. She tried to block them out. She wanted the sensation of Brandon’s nearness to mount anything else that mantled her internally and externally.

He rolled her on her back, and the nerves she should have felt were absent. She never felt more isolated than she did at that moment. She realized that she and her Brandon had entered Fantasy Land, and she didn’t want the carousel to ever stop. He loomed over her, temporarily blocking the sunlight, and she released a deep breath. And as he settled himself between her thighs, she grabbed a hold of his neck and she started to cry soft sobs into the collar of his shirt. He steered clear of asking her what was wrong because maybe he already knew.

Maybe she’d finally throw herself off of the constantly rotating carousel. Maybe she’d grow sick of the dizziness, of the

annoying, perilously persistent revolving door. But she liked the way it felt; she liked being near Brandon.

...

She ordered him to take her home. Did he not know that this was goodbye?

Could he not understand she no longer had the desire to speak to him anymore? They were done, finished, no more!

Inside, her heart was breaking, on the outside, her face was still wet from the tears...could he not understand that this was the hardest thing she ever had to do?

No, because he was Brandon Greene, because he could not understand anything through that thick head of his.

She exited the car without saying a word, only left him a single tear, and slammed the car door behind her.

...

He'd never seen twilight before. He'd never taken notice of its enchantment, of its peace, of its silence, of how much it reminded him of Natalie.

He held a beer bottle between his fingers. It had been his seventh in an hour and he felt the sobriety exit his body slowly as his eyes grew cloudy, his mind starting to flourish.

He saw the warmth of the light, felt the haze of the breeze, and he attempted then, in the silence of the evening by the small pond that had become home, to imagine a life without Natalie.

What would change exactly? Hell, he did it for a year, didn't he? How quickly he was to forget that he was the one to leave her, leave them, eliminate any possible future.

What a strange thought of him, of a girl who, only a couple of years prior, would stick her long, brown feet in his face, would tickle him like a child, would tease him about his nail biting or the way his eyes got really big when he got angry, who, in her sweet way, wanted nothing more of him than a friend, a real one, solid support, a rock, a hero.

What was he now?

Where was his principle, his meaning, his word? Had he lost all of that when, in a brief moment of fright and stupidity, he ran away from her and all of his responsibilities?

He reached into his pocket, retrieved his phone, and dialed, slowly, hesitantly. The three droning rings made his head pulsate. And when he parted his lips with the angry words he'd formulated in his head, no sound came out. He was only able to breathe her name once before he clumsily closed his phone again and vehemently tossed it aside.

Chapter 14

THE DREAM



SHE THOUGHT ABOUT CALLING HIM FOR HIS BIRTHDAY.

Twenty-six.

A quick hello, a little small talk and she'd just say it.

"Happy Birthday, Brandy...I hope that you have fun...I hope that you have a nice life..."

Then she reminded herself that just a few months prior, she was crying, endlessly it seemed, over something that had been over for a year.

Calling him would prompt problems, wouldn't it?

Yes, yes. The wounds were still fresh. Her mind helplessly traced back to the willow tree and the ring and the look in Brandon's eyes almost six months prior, and how something in her mind knew that she couldn't do it, that she could never be with Brandon Greene again.

Her friends and family alike thought she'd lost it when she cut her hair towards the end of summer. It now hung just below her chin, in a neat, little bob of loose ringlets. She didn't mind the new look much...the transmutation was freeing.

Old, stuck-in-her-ways Nat was gone.

She'd made the decision to go to Duke Medical School, finally, after toiling with it for so long. It was hard to ignore a school that offered her the most money, that was still located in the south. At such a point in time, she couldn't imagine the thought of living somewhere else and being just as satisfied with life.

She came home to her apartment that afternoon; the interior bathed in faded sunlight, quiet, and expelled a deep sigh of relief. Anthony was on his way over to pick her up for dinner and a movie. She knew that as soon as he told him the good news that he'd want to celebrate.

He was there a little after six, dressed professionally, kissing her cheek as soon as he saw her.

"How was your day?" he asked politely, grazing her bare arm with the back of his hand.

She smiled, nodded slowly in his direction and said, "Nice."

"I didn't see you at the hospital today," he remarked, removing his grey blazer, revealing a sweaty blue shirt underneath. "Where were you?"

"I shadowed a doctor today," she lied.

In reality, she was locked in the storage closet for an hour, holding her cell phone before her, wanting to call him...wanting so badly to call him...wish him happy birthday.

It was the first time in months that she'd thought about him, truly so, about his face, randomly recalling a small period in their stint together, that they rented a scary movie, sat on his couch in the house on Trent road, and she'd never been more scared. In the first moment that she jumped at a frightening part, Brandon reacted immediately, calmed her, chuckled under his breath, and wrapped his arms around her, while she covered her face, peeking through her boney fingers.

"Brandon, tell me when it's over..."

“Nat, just watch the damn movie...”

“I can’t...why does her face look like that?”

He laughs and squeezes her tighter. “You loser, watch the damn movie.”

“You mean to tell me, that that doesn’t scare you?”

“I don’t scare easily...”

She couldn’t remember a time where she felt safe around Ant. Not the kind of “safe” she felt around Brandon. She’d previously appreciated the type of comfort in knowing that he would never let anything bad happen to her.

When she attempted to dial his number a third time, in the dark, smelly closet, she randomly recalled a time where they were in the ocean, and her fear of water had gotten the best of her. The waves just kept rolling in, each one overwhelming her. In seconds it seemed, Brandon was near her, arms lifting her up, above the waves, her fingers pressed into his back, lips against his shoulder blade, smelling him, hearing him say, “Stop all your crying...I’m here, girl...it’s just water...”

In her final, unsuccessful attempt of the phone call, she recalled a time when they went to Atlanta, went exploring in Buckhead at twilight on a warm day. All the windows in the green Explorer were rolled down, the lights of the city alive, the trees green, his music, of the alternative, acoustic nature blaring. They laughed together and she commented on the atrocity of his driving. Her hand was atop his on the handbrake. She relished in the small moments of being in his car, watching him drive.

How could he leave her like that?

“Which doctor?” Anthony asked, clearing his throat.

“What?”

“Which doctor, Natalie?”

“Dr. Benson.”

“But he’s not a pediatrician.”

“He’s not what?”

“He’s not a—are you feeling okay?”

“Yes,” she smiled superficially. “I’m going to Duke.”

“You are?” Anthony smiled that amazing smile. “That’s excellent news, girl. Where do you want to go? Dinner’s on me...”

But before she could answer, Asha entered the apartment, tossing her keys on the kitchen counter.

“What’s up, guys?” she asked, with a heavy sigh.

“Nat’s going to Duke.” Anthony said before Natalie could speak.

“She what?” Asha smiled a big. “Natalie Chandler! This calls for real celebration. Where do you want to go?”

“Well actually, Ant and I were—“

“A bar? How about a bar?”

Anthony looked at Natalie. “Natalie, it’s up to you...”

She thought about it some, thought about how a quiet dinner with Anthony would go, dreaded the idea of him grilling her about her day or how she’s feeling or why she’s making that strange face or why she’s drinking her wine so quickly.

There will be no laughs tonight, no fun, only seriousness, and quickly decides that a night spent with Asha and the girls, forgetting everything, throwing all problems to the bottom of empty margarita glasses, was all the more worthwhile.

They headed toward Uptown Lounge on East Washington Street. Anthony said he'd pass, had to get up early the next morning, looked disappointed as he told her, as he watched her get into the car with Asha and the girls.

Asha curled Natalie's shorter hair into loose ringlets, slapped black eyeliner on her narrow eyes, made her borrow her slinky black dress and stiletto heels, making her a giant, making an entire row of boys stare at her as they strolled down the sidewalk.

"You look good," Asha told her, as they sat on the bar with the girls, glasses of margaritas before them.

Natalie smiled at her friend. "Thank you, I feel good...this outing sounded a lot better than a dinner with Anthony tonight..."

"I agree," Asha said with a small chuckle. She placed her glass down, wiped away the remnants of the drink from her lips and looked at her friend closely.

"You're getting bored with him, aren't you?"

Natalie didn't answer quickly. She sighed, took another sip of her margarita. The music was loud, clouding any of her deeper thoughts.

"You are," Asha concluded. "By you not answering, that's how I know..."

"Not necessarily," she replied, knowing the truth.

"You're afraid to admit it...that's alright," Asha said. "He's starting to bore me too..."

They both laughed.

"It's true," Asha continued. "You've been dating him for over a year...now you're bored with him. The sex is bad, right?"

Natalie choked a little. She shook her head at Asha's question finally.

"No...no, there's no sex..."

"No sex? Well, hell, of course you're bored!"

Natalie sighed. "I don't know what to do, Ash," she admitted.

Asha's face changed, formed to her friend's distress.

"He's beautiful, we make sense together, and he's smart, determined, goal-oriented..."

"But you don't love him..."

"Shouldn't I?"

Asha took another sip of her drink.

"Not if your heart's not in it," she suggested. "Can't force it..."

"Definitely forcing it..."

"You shouldn't..."

"I shouldn't break up with him...that would be silly...and what would Mama think...?"

“Who gives a damn what your Mama thinks, Nat,” Asha said with a sarcastic laugh. “This is your life, you’re twenty-two years old...and if you don’t think that you should be with Anthony anymore, then you shouldn’t be with Anthony anymore...he’s not the one...”

“If ever such a person existed...tell him, I’m still waiting on him...”

“You don’t have to analyze everything, Natalie Chandler...for once, just for once, let your heart do the talkin’...Mr. Right is around the corner, I swear...”

By this time, Natalie was on her second margarita, felt slightly lightheaded.

“I have to go to the bathroom...”

“Want me to come with you?”

No, no,” Natalie said, sliding off of her stool. “I’ll be fine...be back in a second...”

She headed towards the back, waited till she got out of Asha’s sight before she reached into her back pocket to retrieve her phone.

She would do it this time; just say “Happy Birthday” and hang up the darn phone. She just wanted to hear his voice...just wanted to know that he was okay...just needed to know.

She stood just before the bathroom door, hidden in shadow, opened her phone, dialed his number, fingers a little shaky. She just wanted it to ring. She just wanted him to know that she still thought about him...still cared...didn’t want to end things the way that she did.

It rang once...

It rang twice...

Breathe, Nat, breathe...this will be easy...

It rang a third time. In close range a phone rang in sync...

It rang a fourth time. The phone in close range rang again...

A fifth time...

A sixth time...the sound of the phone grew closer...what in the world?

A seventh time...the sound seems as if it’s just around the corner.

A clicking sound...dial tone...

“Natalie?”

His hair was much longer, flayed at his ears and skirted around his lower neck. Something about him looked much older, as if he purposely wanted to strip away any remnants that reminded her of how he looked in college: clean-cut and northern. He had grown dark facial hair around his chin, eyes were tired, weary, and he had a strange slouch, something she didn’t recognize, for someone whose posture she once admired.

But he wasn’t drunk. She could tell.

“Brandon...?”

He only looked at her. The look that used to give her chills once upon a time.

“Since when do you wear that much make-up?” He asked, as if that was the most important question of the moment. “I don’t like it. You look hideous...”

“Likewise...” She lied, of course, finding something strangely attractive in the scruff at his chin and the way his hair looked.

“You cut your hair, I see,” he said, studying her face.

Natalie began to play with her dark ringlets for a moment, nervously. “Yes, I’m still getting use to it...I don’t think I like it...”

“Well,” he began. “I do...you look...grownup...”

“Thank you,” she stammered, dropping her hand from her head slowly.

“What the hell are you doing here? And where’s that boyfriend of yours? You do still have a boyfriend, don’t you?”

Natalie felt herself stumble slightly. She realized that she’d consumed her drink too fast.

“I have just as much of a right to be here as you,” she told him, attempting to stand firm. She didn’t like the way her knees pulsed then. “He’s at home...he had to get up early tomorrow morning...”

She watched the expression on his face sour. He didn’t respond.

“Besides,” she continued with a sigh, feeling as if she had to prove some point to him. “I’m celebrating...”

“Celebrating...what?”

She thought about lying, thought about saying that she was celebrating something that dealt with Anthony and their relationship. Instead, Natalie Chandler folded her long arms with pride and said, “That is none of your concern...”

He laughed haughtily. “Oh, really? ‘None of my concern’? Once upon a time, Natalie Chandler, you told me everything...”

“That was then, Brandon...obviously...”

“Ha, well, I’m surprised you’re even out at a place like this...you know, drinking...I thought you had so much ‘control’...”

“I still have control...and don’t mock me...”

“Not from what I can tell,” he told her. “And I wasn’t...”

“Well...you’re blind,” she said, taking a small step back.

“As you were to most things in life...”

He got a little closer. “Still the comedian, I see...is that supposed to hurt my feelings, Tallie?”

She didn’t answer.

She attempted to walk past him, but he stopped her cold, extending his long arm to the opposite wall, creating a small blockade.

“Celebrating what?” he asked again.

She looked at him, felt a lump rise in her throat.

“I’m going to Duke,” she told him, just above a whisper.

“Congratulations...”

“Thank you...”

“You called me...why is that? I don’t hear from you for months...and you decide to call me...for what?”

Before she could answer, a petite woman with short, dark hair, framing her round face approached his side, clutched onto his arm and reached up to kiss his cheek.

Natalie, the dear girl, felt a shudder run through her. There she was; the mystery girl she'd seen so many times coming in and out of the house on Trent Road; the girl who'd become so comfortable, so quickly; the girl whom Natalie hated within an instant of seeing at her.

“We were wondering where you went, Brandon!” she said with her cheeky smile. Then she looked in Natalie’s direction. “Who is this?”

The lump in Natalie’s throat enlarged. And she crossed her arms with discomfort.

“This is my friend from college...Natalie,” Brandon began, followed by a clearing of his throat. “Natalie this is...is...um...”

“Reina,” the girl said under her breath, giving him a cross look. “My name is Reina.”

“Right! *Reina*...Natalie, this is Reina.”

Natalie shook the girl’s hand, and attempted a smile in her direction, attempted - to the very depths of her - to show Brandon that she was happy for him.

“Well,” she said, dropping her hands, feeling like she could throw up. “I have to run...Asha’s waiting for me...”

“Asha,” Brandon said, genuinely excited. “Might I go and talk to her for a moment?”

Brandon started to step toward the bar, but she placed a hand to his chest, stopped him and said, “No...no, she just had a bad break up...she’s not in the mood to talk to anyone right now...not even you...”

Nope, not even Brandon. Not even the Brandon that she told Natalie’s business to, not even the Brandon who picked her up when her car broke down, not even the Brandon that Asha could turn to when Natalie wasn’t around, not even the Brandon that Asha used to dance with at the house on Trent road on those rainy nights, not even the Brandon that she’d established so many inside jokes with and would stay up and laugh drunkenly about while Scotty and Natalie tried to sleep.

Brandon looked somewhat hurt and took a slow step back.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie breathed.

And she walked away.

She joined Asha at the bar again, gave her a quick smile, and returned to her glass. She bottomed the drink, smacked her lips and mumbled, “She’s sleeping with him...”

Asha arched her eyebrow. “Nat, what the hell are you talking about...?”

“Brandon...he’s sleeping with her...”

“Thank you for telling me that, Natalie, that solved all of my confusion...it really did...”

Natalie signaled the bartender for another for another drink. And, tapping her fingers on the wet bar top, she said, “He’s here...Brandon is here, and he’s with another girl...and he’s been sleeping with her...”

“Brandon’s here? Where?” Asha said, starting to search among the thickening forest of people.

“He left,” Natalie lied. “Left with that girl...”

“Oh, damn,” Asha said, turning back toward the bar. “Well, Nat...did you think he’d just dry up like a prune after you refused him? It’s been six months, give him a break...and it’s a bar...it’s like a second home to Brandon...”

Natalie looked at her friend curiously. “You’ll defend him to the end, won’t you?”

“Oh, Natalie, please,” Asha said, taking a sip of her drink. “This is not about taking sides...it’s about moving on...”

Natalie received her drink from the bartender, clutched it between her tiny fingers, and looked down into it. And she sighed.

“I mean, if Anthony isn’t the one,” Asha continued. “Then you need to find someone else out there that suits you. You made it very clear that neither Brandon nor Ant were the ones for you...let Brandon be happy...and don’t let Ant suffer any longer than he has to...”

“You’re mistaken, Asha,” Natalie told her, taking a long swallow of her drink. “I’m quite over him...quite...”

“Save the lies, Nat...you’re drinking and that’s a telltale sign...always has been...”

Natalie didn’t answer. She only continued to drink.

She didn’t realize how drunk she’d become in a short time until Anthony called her cellular phone after midnight, asking her if she was coming to his place to stay the night. She’d said something strange and slurred-like, something angry, something telling him that she didn’t want to be around him at night, because he only pressured her into having sex with him at night. He’d returned with something angry-like, something loud-voiced, something calling her uptight and prudish, and then a dial tone.

Yes, Natalie Chandler didn’t realize her level of intoxication until she tossed her phone somewhere behind the bar, and after hearing the first couple of notes from one of the very few rap songs that she ever listened to, she proceeded to climb the barstool in which she sat, and climb atop the slippery bar top. Asha, who’d just come back from the bathroom, approached her, wide-eyed, mouth gaping.

“Natalie, what the hell are you doing?”

Natalie only danced, sang the words loudly to the song, and a few drunken white boys hollered at her, encouraging her, gathering around her slowly, watching her.

She felt the dizzy pleasure, felt the beat, felt the melody, felt the pulse...

And she smiled, laughing sloppily. No one would ever call her uptight...and did he say prudish? What was he thinking,

calling her prudish? She would lift the hem of her dress like this; she would tease those pretty white boys below her like that. Yes, they liked how she played with the strap of her dress, didn't they? Pretending as if she was going to show them something really special. But she wouldn't...or would she? She would play with her bob for a little while, with play with its loose, dark curls, would toss her head like one of those white Ugly Coyote girls, would toss up one of her long legs, hike up her dress a little.

She would feel light, feel the warmth of the alcohol, feel her inhibitions fall.

She would even ignore her best friend below her, hollering at her to come down, even attempting to grab at her ankles.

"Natalie Savannah Chandler! Come down right now...or I'm leaving you!"

She would shake her friend off of her ankles, she would laugh giddily, and she would show more skin. Yes, more skin...

"Tallie, get the fuck down from there..."

She, who had closed her eyes, opened them, and saw that Brandon Greene climbing the bar. She stepped back too fast, slipped on her high black heels, but that boy lunged out and caught her swiftly, and he pulled her down off the bar with him. She put up a notable fight but failed in the face of his prevailing strength. The horny onlookers began booing at the big, bad Brandon.

She only fell limp in his arms.

Brandon swiftly tossed Natalie over his shoulder, and she beat his back, but he headed outdoors anyway, Asha following closely behind. Brandon and Asha conversed so lowly that she couldn't hear them. Her increasing agitation then prompted her to start screaming at him incoherently.

"Puh me dow...Bran...puh me down...righ now...you hurtin' me...Brand...Brandon!"

And he did, right into the front seat of Asha's Volvo. He'd strapped her in, didn't say a word to her, shut her door, and she heard him say, though relatively muffled, "Two Advil and water...and make sure she gets her ass in the bed...oh yeah, and a trash can by her bed...she's definitely got a rough night ahead of her..."

She'd forgotten the last time she cried about Brandon, and was sickened by the idea that the tears were approaching the moment she stumbled into the apartment behind Asha, who held her hand, guiding her.

She collapsed onto the bed, felt the familiar lump in her throat. She pictured Brandon, his arms around that girl, his lips on that girl, pictured him laying with that girl, sleeping with that girl in the same spot that she'd occupied so many times over. And with tear-smudged cheeks, she ran towards the bathroom, emptied the contents of her belly into the toilet,

and slumped to the side of the toilet lazily, wishing then, that Brandon was there to pick her up and carry her to bed.

They would lie together, he would rub her head with his big hand, and she would feel his rhythmic breath on her skin, and she'd relish in the fact that she was with him again.

She felt her eyes close slowly, felt her head grow heavy, and roll quickly to the right. A hazy image appeared through the pain of her throbbing skull, and the image slowly became less blurry...

Brandon stands in a tuxedo...he is smiling...Brandon attempts to reach for her hand...she cannot reach him...suddenly the distance becomes greater and greater...she is shouting in his direction...shouting his name, tears follow...a loud crashing sound nearly collapses her eardrums...she watches Brandon slump down slowly, his white shirt beneath his jacket begins to turn red...the distance grows greater...she realizes she cannot save him...Brandon lies dead on the floor, out of her reach...

Her eyes reopened and she felt a strange, cool sweat about her chest, felt her heart grip, and she murmured his name between her lips.

As she recollected herself there on the cool tile floor, Asha rushed to her side, having retired almost an hour prior.

Her friend reached for her hands, pulled her up to her feet, and in a flash it seemed she was in the bed, and Asha was sitting by her side, and Asha was coaxing her to drink water.

She refused to drink, pushing the glass away with her boney fingers.

“Go away, Ash—Asha,” Natalie told her friend. “I’m fine...”

“You are not fine,” Asha Castile scoffed. “And you haven’t been fine since you saw Brandon at the bar.”

“Fine...”

“Not fine,” Asha said. “I’m staying with you tonight...”

“Abso—absolutely not...”

“Yes, I am...”

Asha began to push her way into Natalie’s bed. With a small struggle, Natalie eventually gave up, passed out seconds later, to the sensation of her friend’s arms wrapped around her. They were not Brandon’s...but they suited her just fine.

In another hazy image, Brandon returned, in his tuxedo, they are running through a crowd, tightly packed, and this time Brandon has a tight grip to her hand...

“Come on, Tallie,” he tells her. “Keep up...”

The crowd grows tighter and tighter, and she begins to hear people call his name. She looks to her left...Sophia Baldwin stands in a white gown...Natalie looks to her right...the Reina girl she met at the bar stands in a white gown as well...they shout Brandon’s name over and over, becoming louder and louder...she slowly loses her grip on his hand, the voices grow louder and louder...Brandon doesn’t look back...she begins to cry...the voices, louder and louder...she attempts to shout his name, watches the distance grow greater and greater...her voice is lost...the crowd grows tighter...she tries to call his name again...it’s muffled ... Brandon begins to disappear...the crowd begins to hold her back...she can

see Sophia and Reina run in his direction, their voices loud, booming...she tries to yell out his name one more time...

“Natalie, Nat, N—Natalie...wake up, girl! Nat, wake up!”

Asha was hovering above her in the darkness, shaking the frame of her body wildly. Natalie felt a strain in her throat, felt a tear on her cheek, looked up at her friend.

“Are you crazy?” her friend asked her with a nervous laugh.

“W—what?”

“You were howlin’ Brandon’s name like a buffoon...I knew he got to you!”

...

The next day, she wore her big straw hat, a pair of old cut-off shorts and a slinky white tank, and though her head throbbed, she slaved the heat as she went for a long drive. She found their field, removed herself from the car and sat in it.

Amidst the tall golden grass, she found the sun on her face, captured the breeze in her hair, her arms open wide, and saw Brandon’s eyes in the cloudless sky.

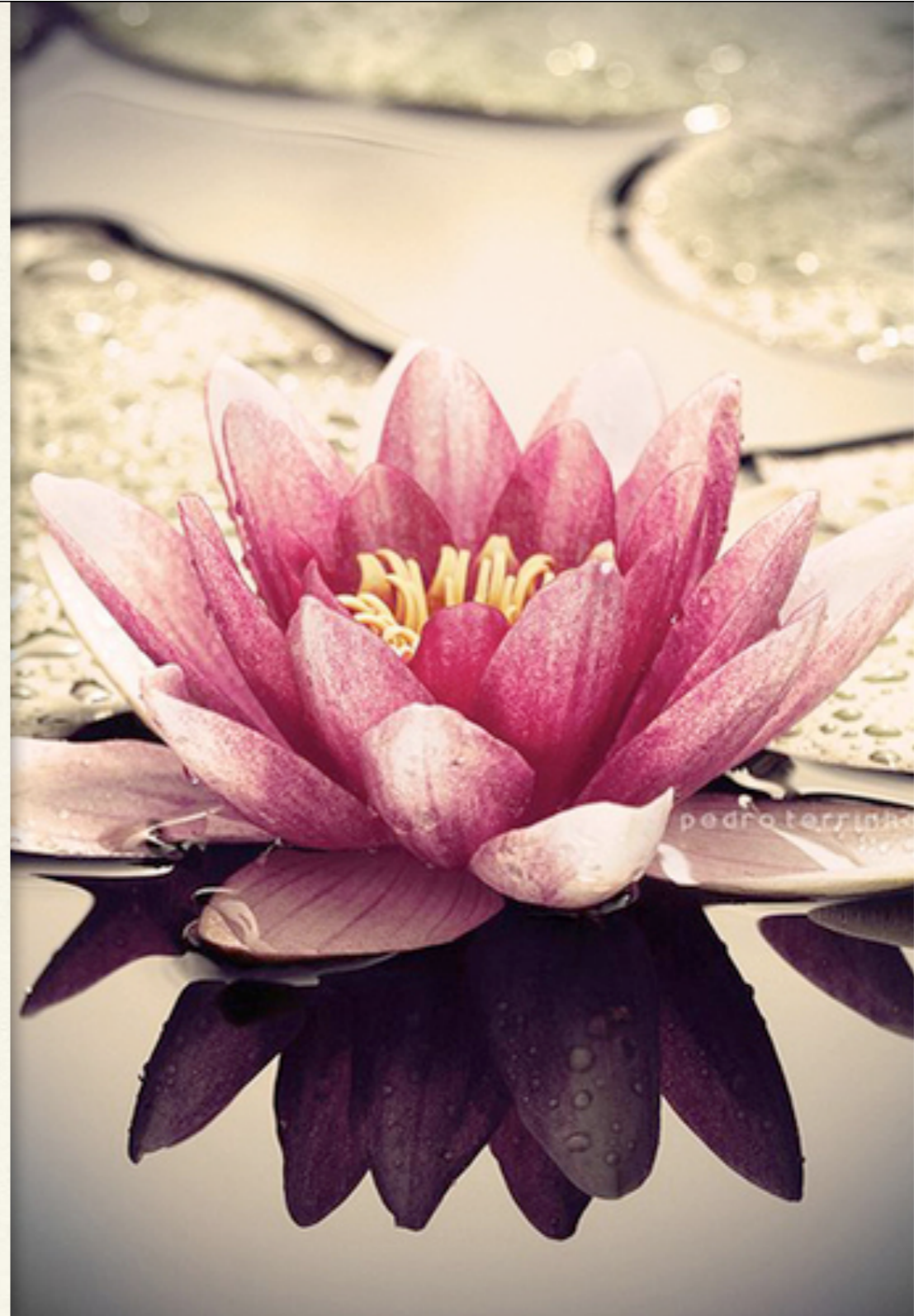
She felt clarity, felt the warmth of the sun run through her veins.

She then became only feeling.

And she reveled in unexpected delight the idea that soul mates actually existed...

Chapter 15

BY THE POND



SHE REALIZED THAT THERE was a gaping hole where her heart used to be, and it had been replaced with a series of painful, selfish, vengeful parasites that made her careless and single-minded. Or at least that's the way she viewed herself.

She thought it best to distract Anthony with his favorite meal that night. And as she slaved over the stove, stirring a piping hot brew aimlessly, she, herself, was distracted by her plaguing dreams and her visit to the field that Brandon had taken her to that frosty night all those years ago. And as much as she knew, the dragonfly pendant had been meticulously tossed in the trash a few months ago...or at least that's what Asha told Anthony.

Anthony startled her when he entered the apartment, calling out her name. He placed a bottle of wine on the kitchen counter and kissed her cheek.

"Baby, it's been a long day," he told her. "But your cooking will make it alright..."

The Reina girl that she'd seen Brandon with was only remotely pretty, so there had to have been more to her that appealed to Brandon. Maybe it was her unmatched perkiness, or the fact that they had the same hair color. Or maybe it was the fact that she seemed fun and sweet in the appropriate way, and that she didn't give him as many problems as Natalie did.

Maybe he was actually falling for her...and maybe it was time to actually stop thinking about him...

Anthony had disappeared into her bedroom. She'd given him a drawer and enough space for his clothes in the closet. It was only a matter of time before he returned in his sweats and lounged on the couch till she got done cooking. She'd forgotten that his favorite television show came on that night – there were also a number of other things she'd forgotten about him.

But he took longer than expected, giving Natalie plenty of time to let her thoughts drift away from her coolly. And it was only a matter of time before she burned the stew that Anthony loved so much.

She turned off the burner, and just as turned around and called out his name, he stood there in the kitchen behind her. She hadn't heard him come.

"God, you scared me," she said, placing the pot down.

"Natalie..."

"What?"

She took notice of his face, as if he were teetering on the edge of delirium. She couldn't decide if he was going to slap her or choke her. She instinctively took a step back anyway.

"I thought you said the dragonfly pendant was Asha's?"

Natalie felt her heart stop, and she attempted to steady herself. She was never good at lying; especially when her emotions were being squeezed to their breaking point. She chose to remain silent. That only seemed to aggravate him further.

"You're just not going to say anything...? You're just going to stand there and not answer me?"

“What do you expect me to say? Shouldn’t you be asking Asha that question?”

“No,” he replied, shaking his head violently. “I’m asking the right person...”

“Where is this even coming from...?”

“You know exactly where this is coming from,” he said, his voice getting louder. He then held up the picture that Natalie had neglected to hide in a more secure spot. The close-up shot featured her and Brandon with their arms around each other, she, with her head rested on his shoulder. She couldn’t remember when and where the picture was taken – but it had become one of her favorites.

He paused for a moment; each breath he took was ridged and painfully audible. “I want the truth, Natalie...I want the truth now.”

She turned her eyes away and started to walk past him. She had no idea where she wanted to go or what she wanted to do. She only mumbled, “Don’t do this right now, Anthony...”

“No, we are,” he demanded. He grabbed her arm aggressively and pulled her back around. She shrieked with discomfort.

He visibly quieted and calmed himself, releasing her arm swiftly. “Isn’t this you,” he began quietly.

She nodded.

“Isn’t that the same pendant he said was Asha’s?”

She nodded again.

He released a long, heavy breath. “Just tell me, Natalie...tell me the truth...what does the ‘T’ stand for...?”

Her lips began to quiver and tears brimmed her eyes. “He used to call me Tallie...”

Anthony nodded. “So the note was for you...?”

She nodded slowly.

“And the pendant...?”

“It was my twentieth birthday...not Asha’s...”

A tear slid down her cheek. Recollection then crossed his face.

“And the girl that Scotty was talking about...the girl that he was so hung up on...?”

Natalie wiped the tear away and Anthony retraced a couple of steps. “It was me...”

“How long were you together...?”

“A year...”

“Why did you break up?”

“He proposed to me, but I said no...so he broke it off with me...”

Anthony paused and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, Ant...”

Suddenly, he raised it again, ripped the picture to shreds, and threw the shards all around the room.

“Sorry? You’ve been lying to my face for weeks about this, Natalie,” he said. “As far as I know you’ve been carrying on an affair behind my back, and I’ve been stupid enough to think

that we had something special and that you were being faithful...”

She wanted to assure him that she was being faithful, just so he could stop being mad at her. But she could no longer perpetuate a lie; she knew that Anthony could no longer trust her as fully as he’d done in the past.

He took a deep breath. “You should have just told me from the beginning,” he continued quietly.

“You wouldn’t have understood,” she replied, breathlessly.

“Maybe not,” he responded honestly, bouncing his shoulders up and down once. “But I would’ve tried really hard... now I can spend the rest of my days obsessing over the things he did right that I’m doing wrong now...all because you wouldn’t tell me. Is he the reason why you won’t move in with me...?”

She wanted to reply honestly and say yes.

Ant, we’ll never be as close as he and I were, she wanted to tell him, but I’ve sincerely tried to make it different between us...it’s just so hard to open up to you the way I did him...he knows all of my secrets...my dreams, my wants, my needs...he knows me better than anyone else...and it’s not fair...I’ve tried so hard to forget he ever existed...but he won’t leave my mind...

She only nodded childishly, watching him throw his hands up angrily and turn his back on her.

“Just tell me the truth, Nat,” he began quietly, bracing himself up against the kitchen counter. “Are you still in love with him? Is this why you kept your relationship secret from me?”

She cried harder and she felt pathetic. But the simplicity in Anthony’s essence was reading like a flashing yellow light at a four-way junction, showing her what her life could be if she didn’t choose wisely. He was beautiful, apt, brilliant and secure, and she could envision the comfortable life that they would lead: she would be a successful pediatrician alongside her husband, and they would live in a brick masterpiece in Buckhead, and she would sink into a life of complete normalcy, and she would hate herself for retreating behind the lines of the boundaries she thought she was rid of. She would love Dr. Jones, but her heart would never be fully satisfied, like only drinking half a cup of sweet tea and leaving the rest out in the sun to evaporate. And then she reminded herself of what being in love really felt like; she could no longer be afraid to embrace it or suppress it or deny it. It would never be fair to Anthony; he would never really know her true love. She had already established a considerably stronger connection with someone years ago; and she was now willing to step out on a ledge and wait for the mound of rocks to go crumbling beneath her.

Anthony turned to face her again and she knew that her moment of truth was fast approaching. She took a deep breath and braced herself, picturing the pools of Caribbean blue eyes in her head, smelling the coconut shampoo, seeing the rusted

soccer cleats in the front yard beneath a UGA flag, remembering the salty breeze on Jekyll Island, envisioning the late-night conversations that lasted till breakfast at the Pancake House down the street, hearing the laughter as the result of dozens of inside jokes and random events that couldn't be experienced with any other person.

"I love you, Anthony," she whispered, piercing his befuddled gaze with her own. "But I can't lie to you anymore. And I can't...I can't lie to myself anymore. I need to leave. Good-bye..."

It was viciously plain, blunt and simple, but that's just the person she was. She only hoped that she didn't regret her rationality in making her final, heartfelt decision. She would attempt to be comfortable living in the moment; and for that particular moment, she knew that she wasn't in love with Anthony Jones.

She gathered her thoughts on the drive over. She loosened and tightened her grip on the wheel, making sure that she kept her eyes focused on the road. She didn't want her nerves to get the best of her. She veered onto the familiar street, dampened and misty, and she could feel her entrails flip a dozen times. The green Ford Explorer was present, but the baby blue BMW wasn't. She was confident that this would be easy. She knew that Brandon still loved her as much as she loved him. She took a deep breath and exited the car.

She traversed up the driveway, kicking aside the pair of soccer shoes, smiling to herself. She could think of no better joy

than to crawl in his bed beside him and show him just how much she loved him. He would smile and tell her that he always knew she'd be back, so he washed his sheets twice for her, just so they smelled just right.

She had a little giggle about that too.

She knocked on the door slowly and methodically, as she prepared herself for her new future. She heard footsteps approach and quickly finger-combed her hair and ruffled her clothes, momentarily forgetting that Brandon had seen her at her very worst and didn't care. That was the love and comfort that she wanted.

But Reina appeared on the other side, leaning against the frame of the open doorway in nothing more than the blue buttoned down shirt that she bought him for his birthday. Natalie only saw her hazel wolf-eyes, her full coral lips, and her long silhouette of undulating russet hair.

...

"I can't do this," Natalie breathed, turning to walk in the other direction.

"I knew you would come," Reina called after her, chuckling a little. Natalie stopped herself cold.

"I found a stack of pictures hidden in his bottom drawer," she continued. "And you were in every single last one of them..."

She wanted to rip every shred of that shirt off of her body. She wore it proudly, smugly. And she could smell him all over her. She suddenly felt nauseous.

“I guess I was praying everyday that you’d forgotten about him or he’d forgotten about you...but he called me Natalie the other night when we made love...and I found an earring that wasn’t mine in the console of his truck, as if he’d saved it... waiting for you to come back and claim it...but I knew you’d come eventually...”

Reina’s smile was lifeless.

“Where is he?” Natalie pressed.

She only shrugged in return. “He left in a huff about an hour ago...I tried calling him, but it went straight to voice-mail...”

Natalie was relieved that there was a glint of hope left inside of her at the sound of Reina’s reluctance to divulge that information. And she figured that storming through the house and beating Reina to a pulp wouldn’t solve much of anything.

So she pulled her cellular phone out of her pocket and dialed the familiar number, that she sadly knew better than her own, and she hesitantly held the device close to her ear: there was a clicking sound, followed by the sound of Brandon’s voice urging callers to leave him a message after the beep. So, perhaps simply asking him where he was wouldn’t help matters much...

Reina disappeared into the house and reemerged seconds later fully dressed, with a large overnight bag affixed to her shoulder.

“I should tell you to get the hell on or leave him alone,” she told Natalie. “But I would only be wasting my breath, now wouldn’t I?”

“I suppose,” Natalie replied unaffectedly.

Reina nodded sullenly and started the long trek up the narrow, tree-lined road. For a moment, Natalie thought to ask the girl if she needed a ride somewhere, but she truthfully couldn’t care less. She only had acute tunnel vision at the moment.

And then clarity clamored the length of her body, and she smiled confidently, strolling to the dead-end, through the trees, across a long expanse of mushy ground, to an opening in the grass. A large, hazy silhouette sat placidly on the dampened bank, and the breeze ruffled his clothes.

Natalie smiled wider then and she could only let the tears spring from her eyes.

“I guess some things never change,” she quietly said, walking toward him slowly.

Brandon remained still. He then picked up a large rock and hurled it into the water, creating a large plunking noise.

“What are you doing here, Natalie?” he replied, his head lowered.

“Isn’t this where it all began? Isn’t this why we make sense in the first place?”

“You’re a little late in drawing that conclusion, aren’t you?”

He got to his feet and dusted off his bottom. He then diverted his eyes away from hers and proceeded to walk past her, but she instinctively grabbed his arm and yanked him back.

“I’m done!” he yelled into her face angrily. “What part of that don’t you understand, Tallie?”

“Then why can’t you look me in the eye and tell me that? Is that the truth, Brandon? Is that how you really feel?”

He broke free of her grip on his arm and he started to walk away from her again.

“Anthony knows about us,” she admitted. She watched him stop cold, idling his weight on one side of his body.

“I left him tonight, Brandy,” she whispered, sniffing. “I told him that I couldn’t lie to him anymore...and I couldn’t lie to myself anymore...and...he was so angry, baby...but I didn’t care...it had gone on too long, Brandy...and I couldn’t do it anymore...”

He turned to face her, but kept his distance. “What are you trying to tell me, Natalie?”

“You’re it,” she breathed. She took a few long breaths before she continued. “You’re mine...and you’ve always been mine...and...I can’t stand life...without you in it...I don’t...I don’t make any sense without you...and I’m sorry for everything that I put you through...for the confusion, the doubt, the fear, everything...I...”

She didn’t get her chance to finish. Brandon came storming toward her pressing his fingers into her face, melding his lips into hers, lifting her up off the ground, forcing her legs around his waist in the style of a pretzel. She could think of nothing else but how high she felt – not in the physical sense of course. She felt bedazzled and desired, and her small encounter with Anthony and Reina only moments ago, felt like a distant dream that she could only see faint details of.

Brandon lowered her to the ground and kissed her again.

“So, he’s gone, he’s really gone?” he asked her, rubbing her face confidently with his large hand.

She nodded and smiled. “Yes...and Reina’s gone to...I made sure of it...”

“Good, because it was only a matter of days that I would’ve been able to keep up that charade...”

He got her into his truck several minutes later, and he took her back to their field. He spread out the blanket over the grass and he knelt down with her. He sat on his bottom, and she straddled his lap boldly, grinning as she kissed his ears, then his nose, then his cheeks, the cleft in his chin, then his lips. She didn’t remark on how beautiful the stars were, but how beautiful Brandon was, and how his grasp reassured her. She then slowly pulled her hood over her head and placed it on the ground. He rubbed her shoulders, trailing her collarbone with his fingertips as he kissed her again.

“We can’t do this here,” she whispered against the surface of his lips.

“I know,” he whispered back. “But it feels amazing...”

She nodded silently, converging her lips with his again, succumbing to the sensation of the wetness, and the aroma of his proximity.

“We should pack our bags and just leave,” she suggested.

He chuckled into her face, hugging her tightly as he ran his lips along her neck. “That’s not the Tallie Chandler I remember...”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied, smiling in return. “People change...let’s just go, Brandy...”

“Okay,” he replied without hesitation. “I have a good idea as to where to start...”

Chapter 16

RENEWAL



WHEN SHE DROVE her car back to her apartment and saw that Anthony wasn't there, the situation reached a higher level of reality. Perhaps it was the first time that she realized that her decision was real and tangible, and that she and Brandon were both free to do what they wanted. She went into her bedroom and grabbed the first bag she could find. She couldn't remember the last time that she felt this level of happiness.

She found a couple of sundresses and a pair of jeans, and a few shirts. It was only a matter of time before Brandon would arrive and take her away. She couldn't even think of where.

She waited for what felt like an entire hour later when she heard a knock on the door. And Brandon stood behind it, bracing himself against the frame of it.

"You may not want to hear this," he began. She sighed heavily. "No, I don't think I do..."

"My car almost broke down on the way over here...I'm thinking that maybe the gas is low or something small like that..."

"So? Let's stop by a gas station on the way...let's go..."

He entered the apartment, and dumped a small brown bag on her living room couch. He then stood before her and wrapped his arms around her coolly, kissing her forehead slowly.

"I did some thinking on the way over here," he began, pressing his hands into the meat of her sides.

"You make me nervous when you think..."

He chuckled warmly, kissing her cheek this time. "Hear me out..."

"I'm waiting..."

"We're always on the run," he began. "We're always trying to run away from someone or something...it's as if we both have trouble facing things the way that we should. So, do you think that leaving in the middle of the night is the best solution to this hasty situation...?"

Natalie sighed again and eyed him silently.

"I thought you would see it my way..." "I hate it when you make sense..."

"I learned from the best," he replied. "I just want to focus on you for the rest of the night...tomorrow will come, I'm sure of it, and we'll see where we stand...just allow me to stop time for awhile..."

She reached for the sides of his face, encouraging his forehead to embrace hers. "Just promise me," she whispered against the bridge of his nose. "Just promise me that you won't leave me tonight...promise me that I'll wake up tomorrow morning and see you lying beside me..."

He kissed her lips once and she sucked in her breath, taken by full surprise. "I'll never leave you again, Tallie...I swear..."

And she locked her arms around his neck, pulling him in as closely as she could, feeling overwhelmed by his smell and his strong embrace, loving the idea that being with Brandon was tangible once again...

...

He internally thought about the women in his past as he watched his Natalie sleep peacefully beside him. And every once in awhile, he'd feel the need to pinch her cheek, or stroke her head, and kiss her forehead, just to make sure that she was real, and their situation was real. He would never grow tired of watching her. He would never grow tired of wanting to cradle her in his arms, and shield her from the harsh world that she hadn't experienced yet. He would never grow tired of the golden flecks in her mocha skin, or her unadulterated orgasmic scent. He would never grow tired of loving that flicker of vulnerability in her safeguarded eyes, or the fortification of her intelligence, or the core of her pure morality. He wanted to forget about any flaws in their imperfect connection; they were soul mates, through and through, of a juxtaposed kind, brought together by Fate or God or the Universe, or their disquieting magnetism toward one another.

He'd given up on the idea that he'd find someone like Natalie a long time ago, even when their love was in its first stages of development, even when he was convinced that she would never fully love him the way he that he pored himself over her. His feelings for her had transcended falling in love in the simplest of ways, which made his previous involvements with women look like child's play on a playground.

He was sure that he and Sophia Baldwin wanted the same things out of love and relationships: security, honesty, loyalty, consistency – the route to get there was always a little blurry. Their fights were normal, their sex was normal if not fantastic on some occasions, but the pink elephant better known as deplorable chemistry always lurked in the corner, and he knew that he could never marry a woman like her.

Perhaps he and Reina Sloan could've been something great one day, but he kept an impeccable distance from her for obvious reasons. He would always look at her knowing that she would never be Natalie Chandler, no matter how sweet or beautiful or submissive she was. Natalie would never let him get away with anything...and he loved that about her. She would always make him feel young and fresh and necessary. He could never get that feeling with anyone else...

He would take her somewhere special, he would make her feel wanted and loved and appreciated, the way that he used to...

He couldn't believe his luck...

...

She rolled over slowly, and the fresh sunlight stained her cheeks. She felt coolness beside her and felt her heart thump. Maybe the happenings of last night were only a dream or hallucinations of her wishful thinking; maybe she was still en-

gulfed in the nightmare that had had her dreadfully enraptured for months...

But the warm shadows of the morning star moved a little and his silhouette appeared to the left of her and she couldn't help but smile. She gently pressed her lips into his bare back, whispered that she loved him, and slid out of bed.

She started breakfast quickly, assembling what she remembered of his favorite breakfast: two slices of toast, nearly charred, eggs scrambled with cheese and diced peppers, and a large helping of bacon on the side. It would only be a matter of time before Brandon came wafting into the kitchen, wanting to taste everything in there...including her...

But Asha appeared instead, stone-faced and groggy and she slid into a kitchen chair at the small table in the nook.

Natalie tried to hide her smile, but her roommate saw it anyway.

"Why the hell are you so cheery this morning?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Natalie replied, dumping the hot pan of eggs onto a ceramic plate.

"The hell you don't," Asha replied sharply. "You're smiling as if you just won the Noble Peace Prize...what's going on...? Did you finally get laid?"

"God, Asha...no..."

"There are peppers in those eggs," Asha remarked, arching an eyebrow curiously.

"I know..."

"Aren't you allergic to peppers?"

"Possibly..."

"And didn't you and Ant say that you both hated toast?"

"God, who are you? The food police?"

"Ha, ha...something doesn't smell right..."

The sound of a toilet flushing fluttered from Natalie's bedroom and Asha perked up even more.

"Anthony sure got in awfully late last night..."

Natalie cleared her throat, slicing the fruit slowly.

"That's...not...Anthony..."

And just as Natalie finished her last word, her secret appeared in the living room in nothing more than a pair of plaid pajama bottoms. He scratched his belly slowly with a mystified look glazed across his face.

"You cooked me breakfast...?" he asked her, grinning slowly.

She nodded. "Just the way you like it..."

She lingeringly stared at Brandon, feeling giddy and light, blushing each time that his eyes flickered a little.

"Can someone please explain something to me...?"

"No, Ash," Brandon replied, sitting at the kitchen table beside her. He then placed a hand to her shoulder. "Just know that me and your gorgeous roommate over there had a small discussion about some things and decided that it was best to...uh...give it another go..."

"Give it another go? Do you think I'm stupid...?"

"Of course not, Asha, baby," Natalie replied, placing Brandon's meal before him.

“A couple of weeks ago we had to yank you by your teeth to get you to even speak to each other...now, you’re boyfriend and girlfriend...? I don’t understand...”

Natalie joined the table. “You don’t have to, Ash,” she said, smiling into Brandon. “Just be happy for us...”

“Of course I’m happy for you...I just...I just want to...oh, fuck it...I love you guys...”

In many places and many cultures across the great expand called Earth, such a sensation is universally needed as a means to survival. Sure, she wasn’t used to pondering such profound thoughts on a graceful Indian summer evening downtown with her friends, but she liked to think that maybe her narrow scope was changing for the better, and a greater understanding for her purpose in life was forming.

Scotty was just as elated as Asha was, if not more. And as he and his best friend sat across from her and her roommate, he visibly attempted to refrain from asking too many questions about how their coupling came to be, and how they made it look so easy again. Natalie couldn’t answer that question, and she was certain that Brandon couldn’t answer it as confidently either. There were things between that often went without saying, and she realized long ago that her feelings for Brandon were far deeper than she was ready to acknowledge or prove or even voice out loud. But she was still getting used to the idea that he was smiling at her the way that he used to, that she was laughing with him the way that she used to, that she woke up

that morning and he was laying right next to her, filling her body with a familiar warmth.

She could easily acknowledge that very little had changed about him; from the beer that he chose at dinner, to the way he styled his hair. And she was confident and glad that their love for each other had endured time and space and appalling tension...she shuddered a little at the thought of how they used to toward one another, how much she used to hate him, loathe him, want him...

Natalie took a deep breath. She wanted to savor the moment for what it was; she didn’t want to think about what tomorrow would bring or the next day...she only prayed that Brandon never grew tired of her...she didn’t know how she could handle life if he left again...

“I grow bored of Athens,” Scotty said, taking a sip of his beer. Brandon eyed him curiously.

“You’re always growing bored of something, Scotty,” Natalie teased. “This is nothing new...”

“What are you getting at, Kelly?” Asha questioned him, picking a fry from his plate.

“For those who are not aware,” he began, clearing his throat. “My aunt and uncle have a time-share on Jekyll Island and have invited me and my friends down for a barbecue this weekend...and while I have a number of friends, you are the only motherfuckers that I can stand for more than two hours...”

“That was perhaps the worse invitation I’ve ever heard in my life,” Natalie replied.

Brandon chuckled under his breath.

“Will your aunt and uncle be staying the whole weekend?” Asha questioned. “If you’re suggesting that they are two old farts, my dear Asha Rosalie,” Scotty began.

“Then you know nothing about them...they happen to be the two coolest people in the world...they don’t hover...but they know how to party..”

“Hmm,” Asha murmured.

“How much is it going to cost?” Natalie asked.

“Oh, my sweet, sweet Tallie,” Scotty teased. “My aunt and uncle are generous...you can stay free of charge...but you must chip in for groceries...”

“I’m definitely going then,” Asha said, holding her burger to her mouth.

“We’ve got one taker,” Scotty started. “Brandon, Natalie?”

“I won’t go unless she goes...”

Natalie hesitated.

“Nat, don’t think about it,” Scotty told her. “You and Brandon can have a free getaway...you should really take this time to get to know each other again...we can drink free beer till we puke, go to the beach, go shopping in Savannah, talk about science and shit... whatever you want to do...”

Natalie chuckled a little. “Fine...but I’m not wearing a bathing suit...”

...

Riding in Scotty’s car again and listening to the music with the windows rolled down was beyond surreal. Natalie sat in awe for a series of drawn out moments at a time, wishing that she could tritely pinch herself. She lounged comfortably in the backseat and remained quiet for the most part; she was much more comfortable with observing her friends and trying to remember them as they used to be. She couldn’t understand why they’d let each other go so easily, or why they never fought to get it back together. And maybe it was her fault; it appeared as though Asha, Brandon and Scotty had chosen to keep their friendship intact. She was just so unwilling to let the past be the past, she was still hurt, confused.

But she loved that maybe that was all behind her now, and she couldn’t wait for her and Brandon to get all the kinks worked out of their spontaneous reformation. And then she impulsively assumed that they were only meant to be friends, and that their romantic severance was meant to last forever. She took a deep breath at the thought of it, and subtly glanced over at him as he joked with Scotty. And then he glanced back at her and smiled, winking his eye as his fingers slowly snaked along the seat and reached for hers. She felt a series of shivers run through her in the initial contact, and she released a breath through her parted lips.

She quickly pushed that ridiculous notion out of her head. She couldn't stand being near anyone else. It just wouldn't be the same. And Brandon knew it too. She slid her bottom across the seat, and nestled herself in his nook as he wrapped his arms around her. She could smell the cologne she'd bought him so long ago, and she pictured nothing but Jekyll Island, with the moonlit beach and Brandon's moonlit eyes, and her desperate need to resist her burgeoning feelings for him. She was so young and ignorant, but there was something organic and new about their connection, and she couldn't believe that she'd tried to hide her feelings for as long as she did. It was then that she realized that Brandon was more than his looks and his innate sexiness; she could see right through him, and his soul was what she wanted.

Not much has changed since then...

Scotty neglected to mention that his Aunt Francis and Uncle Kent were once two big-time Nashville criminal lawyers, who owned an oceanfront palace, which looked more like a mansion in Beverly Hills than anything else. But the appearance of the near-elderly Kelly twosome did not reflect their apparent wealth, which eased Natalie a little bit.

They allowed their nephew's guests to choose one of five bedrooms, all on the upper level, all facing the ocean.

"You won't even know we're here," Aunt Francis said, shaking herself a martini.

She and Brandon choose the bedroom at the end of the hallway with vaulted ceilings, a king-sized bed, and an obnoxiously large veranda.

"Is this a house or a hotel?"

"Yea, I want to be like them one day," Brandon smiled, throwing their bags on the bed. She sauntered out on the veranda overlooking the crystal clear water, and she attempted to remember why Jekyll Island had been so significant once upon a time. Brandon followed quickly behind her, hooking his arms around her waist, pressing his lips against her temple, letting them linger.

"Finally alone," he whispered. She nodded in agreement. "I can't believe it's been so long since we came here," she said, smiling a little. "We should have come back a long time ago," he replied. "We had a lot of fun that week, didn't we?"

"Speak for yourself," she replied. "I was freaking out the entire time...I was on a very extreme emotional roller coaster. Here I am, starting to regret going on the trip in the first place, because I knew what was going to happen. I knew my best friend felt the same way about our situation as I did. There's something strange and exciting going on between us, and everyone can see it, everyone's acknowledged it except us. We were close, we had fun, he always found a way to make me laugh, I could almost be myself with him. Then he kisses me one night and all of a sudden everything changes...and...and my feelings catapult...and I don't know how to handle myself..."

He squeezed her a little harder. "I had acknowledged it...and I was waiting for you to do the same...I couldn't wait to tell you what I had told Sophia...I couldn't wait for you to understand what was going on in my head...how I was feeling.."

She turned to face him slowly. "And how were you feeling?" she asked him earnestly.

He took a deep breath, eyeballing her intently.

"The way I feel about you now," he told her matter-of-factly. "The way I've always felt about you...you know that, Talie.."

She lowered her eyes momentarily and shook her head. He reached down at the base of her chin and tilted upward toward his face.

"Don't look away from me," he murmured. "I'm tired of you looking away. You aren't some random girl that I stop caring about two seconds into it...you're way more than that and you know it..."

Suddenly reality hit her, and it manifested in wetness on her cheeks. Her bottom lip quivered.

"Then how could you leave me like that?" she whispered.

"I was scared then too," he admitted quietly. "And that night I...I just felt like you didn't want me...I felt like you would've been better off if we weren't together..."

"Well," she began. "Maybe you're right...maybe it would be better if we weren't together..."

His eyes got wider, his brows furrowed. "What the hell does that mean?"

"We'll never be fully satisfied with each other, will we? You'll always want something else...something more from me that I'll never be able to give..."

"Really, Natalie?"

"Maybe we're just not meant to happen," she replied.

"Maybe you were meant to walk away from me...maybe it was better for the both of us..."

"So why are we standing right here, right now? Why are our bags on that bed in there? Why have I slept in your bed the past few nights? Hmm? Why am I standing here, telling you that I love you...?"

"You didn't..."

"I didn't what?"

"Tell me that you love me," she whispered.

He then released a quick breath, reached for her face with both hands and pushed his lips into hers, backing her into the railing. She set herself free for a few seconds, remembering how good it felt to kiss him, allowing him to control her body. And then she pushed him away, sloppily wiped her mouth, and said, "I want you to prove it...prove how much you love me...until then...you can't have me..."

“After all of these years, Natalie Chandler, I think I finally have you figured out,” Asha said, as they changed into their bathing suits.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, sliding her bottoms up her legs.

“You’re mean,” Asha replied, giggling at the blatancy of it. “You’re a *mean* person...”

“In what way have I been mean? Have I ever been mean to you?”

“Maybe ‘mean’ isn’t the right word,” she sighed. “Maybe it’s judgmental...no, discriminatory...no, hypocritical...”

Once she’d finished putting on her bathing suit, she settled on the bed, ogling her friend in disbelief. She tried her hardest not to think about what she’d said to Brandon earlier, but Asha hadn’t been able to let it go, and she hadn’t seen or heard from him since then.

Asha joined her on the bed, sighing. “Look...I don’t mean to be rude, you know that I love you dearly...and I’ve sincerely tried to keep my mouth shut because I could tell that you were genuinely confused about what to do with Anthony and Brandon...”

“I’m listening...”

“When are you ever going to be done punishing Brandon?”

“What are you talking about, Ash?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Nat,” Asha replied. “And don’t go getting all defensive because you need to

hear it. You didn’t have to deal with Brandon after he saw you kissing Anthony, hugging Anthony, telling Anthony you loved him...you didn’t see how hurt he was...you didn’t see him get so piss drunk one night that he cried...he stayed strong around you...he’s always thought about your feelings first. Scotty and I dealt with him and we didn’t judge him or say anything to you about it...because we care about him and we care about you. You can’t keep punishing him, Natalie. You can’t keep hurting him.”

“It’s easy for you to say that, Asha,” Natalie replied, sliding off of the bed and reaching for her bag. “You didn’t have to *deal* with the pain. You didn’t have to worry whether or not you were going to cry yourself to sleep each night. You didn’t have to *deal* with loving someone more than you ever loved yourself. Nobody knows how to *deal* with Brandon better than me...and that’s the truth...”

“Whatever you say, Natalie,” she replied, sliding off the bed with her. “I just don’t want you to understand what I saying when it’s too late and he’s finally moved on...you remember how it was in college...there are plenty of other girls who would love to give him a chance...not to say he would give *them* one...but you catch my drift, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ash...everything you’re saying makes sense...I just wish someone would take my side for a change...I think that I deserve that much...”

Asha shrugged her shoulders as if she were unsure of what to say. She only grabbed her beach bag and headed toward the door. Baffled, Natalie followed closely behind her.

They met Scotty and Brandon at the bottom of the stairs by the door. They were talking to Kent and Francis about something, but quickly ceased when the girls approached them. Natalie kept her distance from Brandon, but intently thought about what Asha had told her. That made it a little easier for her to stare at him. He attempted a smile in her direction, and she returned the favor, quickly diverting her eyes away thereafter.

They climbed in Scotty's truck and headed in the direction of a public beach ten minutes down the main road, despite the fact that the beach house was set on its own private beach. And while Scotty and Asha sang to the music in the front seat, Brandon reached for Natalie's hand slowly, cautiously, but she didn't stop him. Maybe it was her way of apologizing for once again being so foolish and selfish. But, unlike her old self, who would've shrank away, she wanted to face him, talk to him, show him that she was just as willing to put in effort.

And when they reached the beach, they exited the car, walked to small boardwalk onto the sand, and Asha shrieked.

"This sand is fucking hot!" she laughed, jumping from side to side.

"Come here, Ash," Brandon offered, kneeling down. Asha then hooked her arms around his neck and he got to his feet

again, hiking her up to make sure she was secure. Natalie watched as they bounced on ahead of them.

Then Scotty reached for her hand, pulling her close to him, lacing their fingers together coolly. The sky was impeccably clear, and the sun shimmered down easily onto the surface of the water, and the smell of the salt floated amicably with the breeze. The tips of dried sea oats tickled their legs as they walked closer to the ocean.

"You okay?" Scotty asked her, squeezing her hand a little tighter.

That was the first time that anyone had asked her that in awhile, especially someone she was close to. She had assumed that everyone thought she was fine – that's the way she projected herself, anyway.

"Yes, sweetheart," she replied confidently, leaning up to peck his cheek. "I'm perfectly happy..."

"I know this stuff is happening so quickly," he said. "I don't want you to get overwhelmed..."

Natalie knew exactly what he meant. "I'm not going anywhere, Scotty...I'm here for good this time..."

He smiled at her answer. "That's all I wanted to hear, baby doll..."

By that time, Brandon had already set Asha back on the sand, and had already helped her set up her towel and umbrella and cooler of wine coolers and beer. Brandon and Asha nestled down on the towel together as they opened two bottles of beer, clinking them together in a toast.

Scotty helped spread out her towel, and pitched her umbrella in the sand as well. Then he crawled onto it with her, and proceeded to lie in his stomach. Natalie smiled and patted him on the head a couple of times, adjusting her sunglasses on her face. She then lay on her back, staring skyward.

“You should talk to him,” Scotty whispered. Natalie turned her face toward his, tipping her sunglasses downward to reveal her eyes.

“Did he say anything to you?”

“No,” he replied. “But I can sense when something isn’t right between the two of you. You two were all googly-eyed a few days ago, now you’re acting all distant and weird.”

“I’m waiting for the right moment...”

“What’s wrong with now?” he asked. “We’re going to Savannah tonight...I don’t want it to be awkward...I just want us to have fun the way we used to...”

“And you think I don’t?”

“I think you’ve lost sight of all that,” Scotty admitted. “You know, since you date thirty-year-old doctors now and all of that...”

Natalie shoved him playfully. “I’ll think about it...”

But Scotty and Natalie fell asleep soon after that conversation came to an end, and all that she could hear in her distant conscience was the sound of the crashing waves and minute chatter happening around her. When she opened her eyes again, Scotty was still lying beside her sleeping soundly, but

Asha and Brandon were now in the water, dodging the waves, holding onto each other.

She could hear Asha screaming Brandon’s name as they jumped wave after wave, and she felt a pang of jealousy run through her, propelling her to jump to her feet, adjust her hair and head in their direction.

When she approached the shoreline, Asha and Brandon spotted her, and her roommate started waving.

“Hello, sleepyhead! Come in! The water feels great! Brandon’s trying to dunk me and it’s not working!”

Natalie’s eyes settled on Brandon. “I want to talk to you...”

“No can do, Tal,” he replied quickly. “You have to come in the water first...by yourself...”

“Brandy, why don’t you stop being difficult and come talk to me...”

“I’m not the one that’s being difficult, baby,” he said, grabbing Asha’s arms to steady her. “Remember that...you come in the water, then we can talk...”

“If I drown, then it’s all your fault...”

“You’re not going to drown, Natalie,” he told her. “I’m standing right here. I won’t let anything bad happen to you...”

Natalie took one slow step after the other, bracing herself, feeling nauseous and foolish at the same time. She strode as if she were walking a balance beam, waiting for the moment that she’d fall or the water would pull her under. She was convinced that that would happen, and that Brandon wouldn’t be able to get to her fast enough, and in her afterlife she would al-

ways resent him because he couldn't save her. Or maybe it was because she didn't trust him the way that she used to; maybe she was just as scared to venture out into the water as she did when she was only a teenager. But Brandon monitored her every step, and that made her feel a little better about the situation. She then wanted to believe that he really would get to her if she needed him, and maybe this was simply a test to prove her willpower.

Her breaths were ridged but the gap was closing between them slowly. But then a wave crashed into her stomach, knocking her over, and she went under. She didn't have enough time to panic though; she felt a series of fingers wrap around her body, lifting her up out of the water. She hooked her arms around Brandon's neck, spitting out the saltwater, wiping her eyes.

"See?" he whispered. "I'm always here..."

He held onto her and kissed the tip of her nose once tenderly, gazing down at her keenly. She kept her hands hooked around his neck, and she instinctively pulled him in closer.

"Umm, I'm going to go see what Scotty's up to," Asha said, slicing through the water in the direction of the shore.

Once Asha was out of earshot, Natalie sighed and looked back up at Brandon, who now held her arms down at her sides.

"Now," Brandon said. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she replied.

"Maybe," he said. "But I want to hear what you have to say..."

"A little birdie told me that you may have taken some things harder than I gave you credit for..."

"I'm listening," he replied, nodding. "But I think you're accusing me of not caring enough..."

"I reserve the right to be cautious in certain aspects of my life," she explained. "Especially in my love life. I had developed the notion in my head that you didn't care very much for me, even though our college years would've suggested otherwise..."

"I agree..."

"And there were some very key things that you kept from me...out of love or something else...I haven't decided yet..."

"Yes...?"

"And some have suggested to me that I may have been slightly cruel to you," she admitted, clearing her throat. "While others have suggested that you deserve another chance..."

"And where does your opinion fit in?" he asked her.

"I'm somewhere caught in the middle," she replied. "I know that I've been mean to you for a long time now...I know I've made you just as confused as I am. And it's not fair to you, nor is it fair to us."

"Am I going to like the direction this conversation is going in?"

"Maybe...look, Brandy...I just wish you would understand where I'm coming from..."

“I do understand where you're coming from, Natalie,” he countered. “That’s what you don’t see...I’ve always understood you. And I know this is all happening really fast. And part of that is my fault. I’m unfairly backing you into a corner and you don’t deserve that. If time is what you want, I can give you that. Trust me; I’m accustomed to giving you time. If space is what you want, then fine...I can sleep in another bed...and when we get back to Athens I can stay at my house for awhile to give you time to think things over...”

“That’s the thing, I don’t want you to disappear again,” she told him. “I want you to spend time with me so that we can reconnect. I don’t want any mishaps or confusion or anything like that. I just want us to do the best that we can to be where we used to be. I don’t want to hurt you anymore, and I don’t want you to hurt me anymore. Me being stubborn and stupid and selfish isn’t going to happen anymore. I’m going to try and do better, I promise. But I still want to make sure that it’s right for me...I hope you can respect that...”

He kissed her cheek. “Of course I can, Tallie...”

...

Brandon retired to the veranda as Natalie showered. He stared outward, and he could tell that his were drifting. The sun had just begun to set, and the surface of the water bled with red sunlight. And he couldn’t remember the last time he’d given himself enough time to think about anything, especially

himself. He was guilty of considering other people’s feelings and thoughts and wants and needs but people rarely thought that about him. And Natalie was no exception. But he was glad that Asha and Scotty were finally starting to understand who he was and what he was about; there was a long expanse of time where he genuinely thought that he was on his own. And whether or not Natalie chooses to admit it, the fact that she got into the water in the first place shows just how far she’s come. She’s willing to do more than she says she will.

His friends are happy that he and Natalie have decided to work it out, and he secretly prayed that everything worked out the way it did in his head. No one was better suited for her than he – he’d swear on his grandfather’s grave. He tried not to obsess over the things that could go wrong in their relationship – he’d done that with Sophia and look how that turned out. He wanted their love to be as real as he felt in his heart.

And before his mind completely wafted into the sea, he heard music come from inside their room. With his brows furrowed, Brandon followed the sound into the bathroom where Natalie stood in the steamy mirror with a comb in her hand. She rocked from side to side, singing to the music that played from a small stereo perched on the counter. The song repeated, “Settle for my love, that you’ll never miss” over and over again. He didn’t realize how pretty her singing voice was. She stood completely nude, completely oblivious, and a familiar aching in his groin flared up without warning. He only wondered what the night would bring..

When she finally turned around and saw him leaning against the doorframe, she screamed and dropped her comb.

“Brandy, how long have you been standing there?” He chuckled a little. “Does it really make a difference...?”

She quickly grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around her body. “Don’t be embarrassed,” he teased. “Too late for all of that,” she mumbled, attempting to avoid her eye contact.

“I didn’t know you could sing..”

“I can’t..”

“Who knew after all these years of my shower singing...?”

“Brandy, stop it,” she grinned shyly, walking past him.

He reached for the edge of her towel, snatching it off. “I don’t think you need this,” he joked. “It’s far too revealing..”

“Baby, I’m freezing,” she replied, attempting to snatch it back. “Give me my freaking towel back..”

“Oooh, freaking,” he teased. “Watch out, Tal, you might actually slip up and say a real cuss word..”

“Boy, don’t make me beat you senseless,” she replied. He chuckled. “You might want to rephrase that sentence..”

“Oh, my God, you’re so disgusting,” she giggled. “Give it back, damn it!”

He only laughed louder, raising it high enough so that she couldn’t reach it.

“You must’ve forgotten that I know you all your tickle spots!”

“You must’ve forgotten that if you even try to tickle me, I’ll be forced to hurt you...” She attempted to lunge out at him, but he bounced back in enough time.

“That’s okay,” she said, cracking her knuckles. “I know exactly how to handle your insolence...it’s about to get really ugly in about five seconds...”

“I have to be honest, Tal, I’m not in the least bit scared...”

But when she lunged out at him this time, she gained enough force to knock him off of his feet and onto the bed, where she proceed to tickle him in random spots. She was right, she knew exactly where to tickle him to render him completely defenseless...it wasn’t fair..

“Didn’t I say that I wanted my towel back? You just had to do this the hard way, didn’t you, Brandy?”

But her talking distracted her enough so that he could gain enough strength to catch his breath and fight back. He managed to turn her on her back in seconds, tossing the towel to the floor, pinning her wrists to the mattress. He then fiercely attempted to keep his animalistic urges at bay – but the look of innocent vulnerability igniting Natalie’s eyes was driving him crazy. He wanted her to succumb to it and say that she wanted him inside of her again. But she only laid beneath him, panting, licking her dry lips, making a river of balmy blood flow to his lower regions.

The sensation was climbing inside of him, and he sensed that she felt it too. It was only a matter of seconds that he would act on his feelings. He just needed the cue. He nudged

one of her thighs outward with his knee, and followed suit with the other. He heard her suck in her breath as she rolled her eyes closed, licking her lips once more. He was waiting for her to say yes...

Baby, just say it...I'll make you feel alright...I promise...

He leaned down to kiss her lips once and she moaned slowly. The sunset bathed the room in tepid amber light, kindling the golden flecks in her skin.

"I love you, Natalie," he whispered against her collarbone.

"I love you, too," she whispered back, whimpering leisurely afterward. She then reached up and tugged at the hem of his V-neck t-shirt, sliding it up his body and over his head. His eyes never left her face. He placed his fingers on his belt buckle and proceeded to loosen it. This moment was all too familiar – he only prayed that they weren't interrupted this time. She helped him slide his jeans down, and he kicked them off with ease. His boxers followed.

She took his hands, pulling him on the bed again, setting him down on his back. She confidently mounted his hips, and it startled him. This was his baby, his Natalie, his innocent, immaculate, pure, darling, who was now straddling him in a way that made him not recognize her. But he embraced the change. He sat up, hooking her legs around his waist, reaching for her cheeks, kissing her lips over and over again. And then he steadied her face, massaging her hair with his fingers, gazing into her eyes. She smiled, nodded earnestly and whispered, "Yes, baby, yes", and kissed him again.

He rolled her on her back again, and settled himself between her thighs, angling himself just right. The edge of his eager appendage zeroed in for a swift landing. He witnessed her take a deep breath...

And just as the tip his skin touched her own, a knock on the door disrupted his concentration.

"Hey, guys," Scotty said, knocking again. "Are you almost done? I want to get a good parking space on the Riverfront..."

Brandon lowered his head, huffed, and murmured, "Fuck!"

He then kissed his Natalie's forehead, and slid off of her, answering, "Yes, we're coming...chill out..."

"Oh, my God," Natalie said, pressing a hand to her chest in an attempt to catch her breath. "What were we just about to do? Oh, my God...oh, my..."

She quickly grabbed her clothes from a chair in the corner. He attempted to reach for her. "Natalie, baby, don't...don't..." But she dodged his grasp, raced into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

...

They enjoyed seafood on the Riverfront in Savannah, watching a series of boats of different sizes float by with ease. And she drank more than she should have at dinner, and at Wet Willie's only a few paces away – damn that lack of an open container law.

She wasn't drunk; she only wanted to numb the memories of what occurred only a couple of hours before, but the alcohol only made her want Brandon more. She could remember the size and shape and outline of his penis, and his chest, and the muscles in his arms, the look in his eyes. She found it hard to swallow. She'd wanted to make love to him for so long, but when she got this close, she couldn't do it...

She sat on a bench in front of a street musician while Asha, Brandon and Scotty went back into Wet Willie's for another daiquiri. The wild breeze moved swiftly through her hair and the sound of the organic acoustic guitar lulled her paranoid senses.

"You look cold."

Brandon loomed above her head, removing his black blazer from his shoulders. She took it without hesitation – she wanted his smell to envelop her as it'd done before.

Then he sat down beside her, and their hips grazed. She rolled her eyes closed and turned her head away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry about earlier..."

"What are you apologizing for, Natalie?" he chuckled, rubbing her head. "You have nothing to apologize for. I was being stupid. You're not ready."

She turned to face him again. "I want to be so badly...you just don't understand..."

"I'm going to be honest, baby...I want you to be ready too...but it's no big deal...I promise you...I have the rest of my life to wait..."

She raised her eyebrows at the latter part of that statement. Rest of my life... She didn't want him to see that it made her feel itchy.

The following morning, she slept longer than she anticipated, but her body felt rested and renewed. But Brandon wasn't by her side. She then raised herself up, brows furrowed in curiosity, calling out his name in a whisper, his voice drowning into the late morning stillness. When she didn't get a response, she slid off of the floor and threw on the first nightie she could find; she couldn't recall why she took it off or when, but it was probably around the same time that Brandon had mysteriously removed his underwear in the middle of the night, groaning to himself and nearly rolling on top of her. It was then that she tried to breathe as she attempted to cool down the flagrant temperature rising in her body. She didn't want to think about her actions if she saw his penis again, if she smelled his animalistic warmth, or heard him groan like that again...

She shook off the foolishness as she crept out of the bedroom and down the hallway, calling out his name again. Scotty nearly startled her when he poked his head out into the hallway, glaring at her.

"Why the hell are you calling Brandon's name like a fool?"

"You're still asleep?" Scotty rolled his eyes. "Girl, I'm on vacation...I'll get up when I damn well please..."

"I'm looking for Brandon," she replied. "He didn't happen to take off again, did he?"

"No," he chuckled, taking a cue from her teasing tone. "I think he's in it to win it this time...you want me to help you look for him?"

"Nah, I'm okay...you go back to sleep..."

"Hell, I'm wide awake now...I might as well go and terrorize Ash for a little

while...maybe we can go into Savannah later and do some sightseeing...?"

Natalie smiled. "Sounds good..."

She followed the sound of minute chatter coming from the kitchen downstairs. It was there that she found Brandon looming over the stove, poking at something in a frying pan with a fork. Francis and Kent were sitting at the breakfast bar with a newspaper folded out before them.

"There she is," Francis beamed, sliding off of her barstool. "You look refreshed darling..."

"I am," Natalie breathed, smiling. "This is a very beautiful house."

Francis placed her hands on Natalie's shoulders. "Would you like a mimosa while you wait on breakfast?"

"Oh, I don't know," Natalie said. "I'm not big on drinking so early in the day..."

"Oh, hell, you're on vacation...live it up, child," Francis teased. "Have a seat; I'll have one for you in no time."

Natalie not wanting to disrupt the peaceful atmosphere compliantly took a seat across from Kent, who then took a sip from his mug of coffee.

"Brandon decided to cook us breakfast this morning," Kent offered. "Did he now?" "Yes," Francis answered, pouring the orange juice and champagne mixture into a glass.

"He's making us country ham and scrambled eggs...he tells us that it's your favorite..."

Natalie felt her cheeks begin to tingle, and her attempt at hiding her smile failed. "Yea, something like that..." Brandon turned his eyes away from the stove momentarily and winked at her.

"Oh, gosh, Kent, she's so shy," Francis said. "Do you remember when I was that shy all those years ago?"

"No," Kent answered abruptly. Natalie and Brandon chuckled under their breath. "Oh, my Kent is an old fart," Francis said with the roll of her eyes. "I was just like you when I was in my twenties. I tell you, I felt something strong about that old fool sitting over there and he had absolutely no clue. We were both law students at Harvard...but he came from old money and I didn't. I managed to convince myself that he wouldn't be interested in me for that reason. Now, don't get me wrong, I had all the self-confidence in the world...at twenty-three, I'd come a long way. You see, Kent wasn't like the other pretentious, arrogant assholes that I shared classes with. He was different. It wasn't until I had enough balls to tell him how I truly felt that I learned he felt the same way about me...ever since then, no one has been able to tear us apart..."

Natalie knew exactly what Francis Kelly was talking about, but she chose to play the fool anyway...

Brandon turned around again and his eyes lingered over her face. Maybe he understood what she meant too...

"I'm sorry," Natalie sighed. "It takes me a while to warm up to people..."

"I understand completely," Francis replied, nodding. "But just know that you shouldn't waste a moment, hiding who you are and how you truly feel...you should let it out...oh, Lord, I should stop drinking...listen at me, talking to you as if I'm your mama..."

Natalie smiled. "I can see why Scotty loves y'all so much..."

"Thank you, child," Francis answered, placing the champagne glass down in front of her. She then returned to her barstool, glancing in Brandon's direction.

"Brandon's quite a catch, isn't he, Natalie?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean by that, Francis," Natalie replied, attempting to hide her grin.

"Oh, please," Francis replied, rolling her eyes again. "I noticed it the moment that you two walked through that front door, didn't I, Kent?"

"Sure you did, Fran," Kent answered, holding the newspaper up to his face.

"I see the same uncertainty in your eyes that I had when I was that age," she assured Natalie. "You just have to let it go..."

As uncomfortable as the attention was, Natalie couldn't help but notice that Francis made complete sense. But if she

knew the entire story, wouldn't she be able to understand the uncertainty that she felt inside?

"Breakfast is ready," Brandon said, placing a plate down in front of her. "Here you go, Tal..."

"Brandy," Natalie replied, beaming at the aesthetically pleasing presentation. "It actually looks good..."

"I learned from the best, didn't I?"

Natalie felt her heart thump again. The breakfast was surprisingly good, in spite of the number of years that Brandon refused to cook. Natalie figured that he was just scared or maybe he really did enjoy her cooking enough.

Nevertheless, the fact that he remembered her favorite meal after all the time that had passed, was duly noted...

"If you need any help with the barbecue," Natalie began as they sat at the breakfast bar together. "I'd be more than willing...I haven't cooked extensively in awhile...I miss it..."

"Well, we appreciate that, Miss Natalie," Francis said, showing a forkful of eggs into her mouth. "But we're not exactly having a barbecue..."

Natalie knew that she looked thoroughly confused.

"Kent and I decided to renew our wedding vows a little early," Francis beamed. "We've been married for over thirty years and I think it's about damn time we did something about it, don't you think?"

"Of course," Natalie agreed. "But where are all the guests? What exactly are the plans?"

“You have to excuse my Natalie,” Brandon began, smiling. “She pays a little too much attention to detail...”

“Well there’s no need,” Francis replied calmly. “It was a spontaneous decision. We’re going to stand right out on that beach with a local preacher and say our vows at sunset. I’m almost sixty years old; we don’t need all that frilly, pompous shit. I’m still in love with Kent and Kent is still in love with me...that’s all that matters...”

...

The wedding was just as impromptu and organic as Francis said it was going to be, but Natalie still felt the need to look her best. And as the old Kelly couple exchanged vows under a falling ochre sun and a quiet breeze, Natalie caught herself gazing in Brandon’s direction in a lingering fashion, as her dress swept along the sand, as her breath got caught in her throat, as he smiled serenely in her direction. Suddenly she was the shy, naïve seventeen-year-old freshman again, and being in Brandon’s presence caused a milky sensation in her stomach.

“My dearest Francis,” Kent breathed as he fought the inevitable tears. “A man through great obstacles of misfortune, heartbreak and confusion before we find the person who completes us in every way possible. You are the missing key to my lock, my darling...you are my mirror...you have evanesced into every part of my soul, my baby...I sincerely believe that in a previous life we loved each other just as much as we do now...I

always knew that you were the one...and I will love you till the very hour that I stop breathing..”

“Kent,” she began, smiling through her tears. “There were a lot of things that I never thought I’d be or do or see. I never thought I’d meet a rich bastard like you, I never thought I’d fall in love with a rich bastard like you, I never thought I’d breathe a rich bastard like you. You have always been the better part of me; the person that I always wanted to be but could never understand fully. I still want you just as much as I did when we were young and foolish, living in that ratty one bedroom apartment; I still admire you just as much as I did when we had that Morality class together...you are brilliant and self-assured and fierce. I dreamt of a man like you but never knew that you truly existed. I am so glad that I am your wife...I cannot stand life without you...”

When Natalie glanced at Brandon again, he mouthed I love you and a tear escaped from her eye and slid down her cheek.

“Are you guys hungry?” Scotty asked after the ceremony was over. “I’m pretty sure my aunt and uncle are going to want some alone time after all of that...”

“I could eat,” Asha answered, tugging at the hem of her dress. “Natalie, Brandon? Are you in?”

Brandon and Natalie glanced at each other, and then he shook his head. “No, you guys go ahead...Tal and I are going to take a walk...”

Brandon reached for Natalie's hand and tugged her away before she had a chance to protest. She didn't want to anyway...

He pulled her close and wrapped his arm around her waist. The sun still lingered peacefully over the horizon, the beach was uninhabited, and the sound of the crashing waves was rather tame. Natalie couldn't think of another place she'd rather be...

"That ceremony was intense, wasn't it?" Brandon asked her.

She nodded slowly. "Yea, but I couldn't think of a better way to do it...get married, I mean...it should be personal, intimate, meaningful...I think people get too caught up in the ceremony that they forget about the marriage and the lifelong commitment..."

"I completely agree," he replied. "Besides it's more cost-efficient..."

"Since when do you care about spending a lot of money?" Natalie teased, nudging him

"I've changed, Nat," he replied with a sigh. "I can't put it any simpler than that..." "I know," she quietly replied, smiling into him. "I can tell..." He attempted to kiss her, but she quickly broke free of his grasp, removed her sandals, hiked up her dress and ran toward the shore.

"Natalie, what the hell are you doing?" he asked her, removing his shoes and socks. She squealed, jumping through the water, diving in completely. Brandon was close behind her,

removing his shirt and belt, jumping in after her. And by the time he reached her, she had already breached the surface again, startling him. He smiled as she pulled him in close, wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing him once.

"What's going on with you?" he asked her, peeling back a clump of hair that had gotten stuck to her cheek.

She studied his eyes, grinning warmly, and whispered, "I've changed too..."

He kissed her again, longer and deeper this time. Then she pulled apart from him and gingerly ran her fingers along her cheek.

"Francis was right, Brandy," she whispered. "I shouldn't be afraid to show how I truly feel...I shouldn't be afraid to tell you what I'm thinking...time is passing us by...and damn it, I love you, don't I?"

"I love you too, Natalie," he murmured, nuzzling his nose against hers.

"This is right, Brandon," she replied, witlessly. "This is so right that it scares me...and you used to scare me...but I'm not afraid anymore...I refuse to be..."

"What are you trying to say...?"

"There are some things that I've been trying to tell you but I could never get them out," she whispered, her voice splintering.

He grinned. "I have some things to tell you too..."

"You go first," she offered.

He shook his head. "Not right here, not right now..."

She then grew anxious. “Just tell me, Brandy...why are you acting all weird...?” “I’m not trying to,” he replied. “We should talk when we’re alone tonight...”

“Am I going to like this conversation?”

He sighed and hesitated momentarily. “I’m thinking that you are...”

“Tonight, then?” He nodded. “Fine,” she sighed, rubbing his shoulders with her hands. “We should go meet up with Scotty and Asha...we’ve been isolating ourselves all weekend...”

“And that’s a bad thing?” he replied, leaning in to kiss her.

“Yes,” she replied, laughing. “We’ve got to do better...”

...

He remembered how he felt about Natalie three years ago, when they couldn’t have been any closer. He was firmly secure in the idea that their relationship could stand the test of time, as trite as that sounded, and he knew that every part of him wanted her by his side for the rest of his life. So, maybe that would explain why he’d pushed the notion that she was only twenty-years-old and hadn’t finished school yet out his mind. Being young and naïve was easier to admit than the idea that maybe she really didn’t want to marry him. And in that three year span, he knew that he needed to change in order to win her back: he wouldn’t pressure her into doing anything she wasn’t ready for; she had never been as susceptible to change

as he was and it took him awhile to understand that. The fact that she was willing to give it another go, even after all the obstacles their relationship had gone through was indication enough that she may have been ready for a new leap – and perhaps it was his time to discern which one would be better.

He waited on the screen porch with Scotty, sipping slowly from a bottle of Corona.

“If you two losers looked any happier, I might be forced to throw up,” Scotty teased. Brandon stared outward into the quiet sound behind the house. The light in the day was dwindling slowly and steadily, but night was approaching swiftly, and with the darkness he would be forced to uphold his end of telling his Natalie exactly how he felt.

“Look at you,” Scotty continued. “All smug and quiet and shit...it’s as if she finally gave it up or something...”

“I wouldn’t tell you either way,” Brandon replied, placing the bottle to his lips again.

“Just like the old days,” Scotty chuckled, shaking his head. “You wouldn’t tell me a thing about that girl...like I was just going to ravage her or something..”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “Be honest, Scott...”

“Fine,” he replied, huffing. “Maybe I would have...but she’s like a sister to me now... I’d beat the shit out of any guy who thought of her that way...”

“Then you can imagine the way I felt about her then,” Brandon replied.

“She’s the only thing you did right in college,” Scotty admitted. “Don’t fuck it up this time...”

“Oh, I don’t plan on it...”

Natalie and Asha appeared a few minutes later. Brandon couldn’t keep his eyes off of her. Her haircut, which now landed a few inches above the base of her neck, had grown on him to the point where he couldn’t imagine her looking any prettier. It now gave her a level of sophistication the he either didn’t notice before or simply wasn’t present. His eyes scanned her body, and it took him several seconds to notice that she was actually scowling at him.

“What’s that face for?” he asked her.

She pursed her lips and vehemently tossed his phone in his lap.

“Here,” she said. “You forgot your phone upstairs and I thought you might need it. You should really check your messages...I’m assuming they are important...with that said, Asha and I are going into Savannah to have dinner..by ourselves...”

Natalie began to walk away, Asha turned around and mouthed I’m sorry to him, and before she disappeared out of view, she yelled, “And you better not follow me!”

“What the hell was that about?” Scotty asked.

Brandon shrugged his shoulders and slowly glanced at his phone, realizing that he had three unread text messages:

I got your message from last night. It was good to hear from you. I’ve missed you.

We really should talk when you get back from the beach. Is she with you? I can’t stop thinking about you...please don’t say it’s over between us.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” he said, banging the phone into his forehead.

“What the hell is on that phone?”

“The last thing I ever wanted Natalie to see...”

“Didn’t you just say that you didn’t want to fuck it up with Natalie?”

“If he wants to break up with me then he should just do it,” Natalie said. “Why wait till tonight? I can have my bags packed and I’ll be gone in an hour...”

“You’re not going anywhere tonight as drunk as you are...”

“That’s why I have you, Ash,” Natalie replied, patting her friend on the back. “We can go back to Athens together..”

“No, hell no,” Asha said, shaking her head. “You’re dealing with this while you’re here...you and Brandon have come to fucking far for y’all to go out like this...”

“I disagree, Asha,” she replied. “I refuse to come between him and another girl...I refuse to...and if you say that him and

Reina could've been some great one day, who am I to stop it from happening..."

"Natalie, just stop it! I was saying that to motivate you...not scare you away. Yes, Brandon is...retarded...you and I have known that for years...but that doesn't mean he's sleazy and deceitful...that doesn't mean he's trying to get back with her...for all you know she's just crazy..."

"There you go, taking his side again," Natalie slurred, rolling her eyes. "You're always taking his side. Why is it that this one guy has the power to make me so miserable and happy at the same time? I don't understand it..."

"It's called being in love, Natalie..." "And you know what it makes me feel like, Ash? Pure shit...smelly, raw, bubbling shit..."

"How very poetic of you..."

"You-you know what...? I'll tell you what...I'm glad...I'm so-so glad that I didn't fuck him last night...you know why, Ash? You know why? Because I probably would've forgiven him...that's what girls who sleep with their lovers do...they forgive them like fools..."

"You're highly misinformed, Nat," Asha chuckled. "And you're going to forgive him... you're a grownup now, remember?"

"Never!" Natalie yelled, banging her glass down on the table. "Because he's never going to find me...and you better not tell him where we are, Ash...I swear to God if you do, our friendship is over...over, I tell you! You know what I'm going to

do, Ash? I'll tell you what I'm going to do...I'm going to find me a new boyfriend...and he's not going to be white, he's not going to have black hair, he's not going to have big blue eyes that melt your soul, he's not going to have broad He-man shoulders, or an infectious laugh, or great hugging capabilities or a huge penis or a melt-in-your-mouth kiss, or intelligence, and most importantly, he hasn't fucked someone named Sophia or Reina in the past three years...I'm going to look for him right now..."

She sighed, pushed her unfinished drink out of the way, and slid off of the barstool. When she turned around, Brandon was standing right behind her, eyeing her sympathetically.

"No, no," Natalie said, waving her hand from side to side. "Don't give me those sad, puppy-dog eyes, Brandon...they're not going to work, I tell you...I'm done with you...have fun with Reina..."

She began to walk away, but she quickly turned around, pointing her finger in Asha's face. "And you...you sorry excuse for a best friend! You suck...you told him where we were, didn't you? You bitch..."

"I'm sorry, Natalie," she said. "I did what I thought was best...I love you both...you belong together..."

Brandon began tugging at her hand, pulling her toward the door, and she tried resist but was too weak in light of his strength and her intoxication.

"You don't want anyone to think that we're together, do you?"

“Yes,” he replied, quietly. “I want everyone to know. I want to shout it from the rooftops...”

“You’re full of shit,” she replied. “And you’ve always been full of shit...that’s why I’m going to find someone else...”

“I’m sure you are, Natalie...”

She pushed her hand out of his grasp and said, “Because you’re only going to leave me again...I’m going to wake up tomorrow and you’re going to be gone again...that’s what you do, Brandon...you walk away from me...”

When they returned to the house, Brandon briefly went into the kitchen to get her a glass of water then came back to her, forcing her to drink it, so that she could sober up enough to talk to him.

Once she’d finished, he took the glass from her hand and placed it back down on the counter. Scotty and Asha had left them alone minutes earlier, and he could sense her visible uneasiness about being alone with him then.

Nevertheless, he reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers. She quickly snatched it away thereafter.

“Go ahead,” she said, waving her hand.

“Go ahead, what, Natalie?” he asked her, his impatience climbing.

“Go ahead and leave me,” she said. “I’ll close my eyes and pretend that I’m passed out...”

“I’m not going to leave you, Natalie...”

He extended his hand again, inviting her to grasp it. She only looked down at it, clicked her teeth, and looked back up at him again.

“Don’t do this right now...”

“If I take your hand, where are you going to take me? I want to watch you leave me this time. So that I know for sure that it’s over between us...”

Brandon pursed his lips to keep from saying something that he would soon regret. He tried to remind himself of Natalie’s tainted mindset. He also tried to remind himself that it would take much longer for her to forgive him of his ultimate fuck-up than he originally anticipated. He could think of only two things that would make it alright...

“I’m taking you somewhere that I should’ve taken you a long time ago,” he told her. “I’m not going to hurt you...”

“Right,” she mumbled, faltering a little. “You’ve already done enough of that already, haven’t you?”

He took another deep breath and turned to face her, steadying her with his two big hands. “Nat...please...”

“I ought to make you kiss each of my toes and grovel,” she replied, icily. She snatched her purse off of the counter.

“Just in case I need to call the cops on you...keep your damn hands to yourself...” He rolled his eyes. He helped her into Scotty’s SUV and clicked the seatbelt secure. She shoved at him a little.

“You’re too close, Greene,” she yelled. “Let’s make this a quick trip...I have some packing to do...”

She remained silent the entire ride, even when he purposely played one of her favorite songs from a CD that Scotty had stolen from her years ago. She only stubbornly crossed her arms at her chest, shook her head and turned her eyes toward the window.

This will be harder than I'd planned, he thought.

He pulled into small lot of gravel with a small boardwalk lifted at the end. They exited the car and he extended his hand for her to grasp again. She sighed, glaring at him unbendingly. It was then that he could tell she was finally sobering up.

She took his hand.

He led her onto the boardwalk; the tiny crystals of golden sand crunched beneath their step. The air was tepid, silent, still and the skies were remarkably clear. He liked leading her again, being in control of her movement, of her overall knowledge of the situation. He was surprised at how quiet and compliant she was being. His eased mind was spoiled; he was waiting for the moment that her tranquility would cease, and she'd question their whereabouts or their future together or why she chose to love him so much instead of hate.

They stepped onto the sand together and she removed her flip-flops. He took them from her and hooked his fingers around the straps of them.

They ambled along steadily in silence; she willingly grasped his hand a little tighter. The current of the black ocean seemed just as peaceful as she was, and the moon painted a silver streak along the panes of her hair. She kept

her eyes darted blankly before her; he, defiantly, couldn't keep his eyes off of her.

They came along a series of beach houses, draped in shadows that spread along their exteriors like weeds to a sidewalk. And Natalie idled in front of one particular house, and Brandon could hear her pant as she rolled her lips in.

"I can't believe it," she whispered, running her hand through her hair slowly. "It still looks exactly the same..."

She wandered closer to the house with green siding and large wraparound porch, and their fingers lost their connection. Brandon only grinned to himself.

"There are the porch, and the deck," she breathed, panting a laugh. "I bet there's still a crack in the window from where you and Scotty tossed that football all hard..."

He chuckled. "Yea...we had a tad bit too much to drink that night..."

"And I see the hammock," she remarked, cutting her eyes in his direction.

He nodded. "Yep...we took some great naps in that thing..."

"It was a great week," she murmured, wrapping her arms around herself. He nodded. "I remember," he began, taking a heavy sigh. She turned around slowly to face him.

"I remember sitting right here with you one night and telling you that I would never leave you...do you remember that, Tal?"

She nodded silently. He stepped a little closer to her.

"I remember," he continued. "Standing right here and kissing you for the first time...I wanted to tell you so many things but I couldn't get them out just right..."

She folded her arms again. "Well...here's your chance, Greene...spill it..."

He took a seat on the sand and patted the space next to him. She complied.

"I dated Reina out of spite," he admitted. "I had sex with Reina out of spite. I don't think I was ever really and truly ready to admit that until just now..."

"I'm glad you said something about it," she answered, cradling her knees in her arms. "No matter how queasy I feel inside at the thought of you two..."

"I feel stupid and childish for admitting it," he replied. "And at one point I really did try and make myself feel something significant for her...maybe out of guilt or something else...I don't know..."

"Brandon," she began quietly. "Just tell me those messages weren't real...tell me you didn't entice her...tell me I don't have anything to worry about..."

"They *weren't* real," he responded. "Don't ask me where she got that information from. I haven't spoken to her in a few days now. That whole situation was something that I hadn't prepared myself for and I shouldn't have done it. I knew it was over long before I had the balls to admit it to her. I had just broken things off with Sophia and then she came along...and I...I fucked up..."

"*Sophia*," Natalie breathed with a methodical focus. "Now that's a name I haven't heard in awhile..."

"I know," he said. "Aren't you relieved?"

"I still sleep with one eye open," she teased. "I'm convinced she's going to find me and stab me multiple times in my sleep..."

"It wasn't your fault," he said. "None of what happened between us was your fault. Remember that..."

"I know that," she sighed. "It took me awhile to understand, but I definitely do now..."

"Good..."

"Brandon, I," she began. Her voice then drifted with the wind, and she got to her feet, dusting off her bottom. "I just...I just want you to be good to me," she replied, running her fingers through her hair gingerly. "I'm sorry for the way I acted tonight but...but it came from a real place..."

He released a heavy breath and got to his feet, grunting. She'd started to walk away, but he reached for her hand and pulled her back to him. She then sighed too, rising to her tip toes to wrap her arms around his neck, embracing him. He returned the sentiment, burying his lips into the top of her head, kissing it gently.

He wanted to tell her that he worshipped the ground she walked on, that he worshipped every morsel of her brown skin, worshipped her southern drawl, her ingenuity, her honey-dipped soul, her near-mute, pensive, elusive disposition, the silk of her black hair, her intimidating self-respect, her sarcasm,

her familial compassion, her laugh, her taste in music, her cooking, her embrace, her fragility, her authenticity. She never made him feel inadequate, she never lied to him, and she never ignored him. He'd never met anyone who was more willing to sacrifice every facet of herself for the love and care and well-being of another. He'd realized a long time ago that there were so many things about his Natalie Savannah Chandler that made her so beautiful.

She pulled apart from him, and pressed her lips against the tip of his nose, smiling and giggling under her breath. She ran her thumbs along the nape of his neck.

"I knew you cared about me the night you found me crying," she whispered. "I was sitting right here...and you came after me...I...I knew then that my feelings wouldn't go away. I guess I should've figured out a long time ago that you'd never stop chasing me...I'll always love that about you, Brandy.."

He kissed her then. She whimpered. There was no greater time than the present, he thought...

He pulled away from him, and dropped down to his knees. She looked down at him with confusion.

"What are you doing?" she asked him. He could feel her hand trembling in his.

He slowly reached into his pocket, murmuring, "Something I should have done a long time ago", pulling out a small black box.

"Brandon," she whispered, breathlessly.

"What in the hell...?" She then started to cry.

He attempted to smile through his nerves.

"Natalie, you are my life," he began. "I can't think of a better way to say it. I don't want to try and imagine what my life would be like if you weren't in it."

"Oh, my God," she said, placing a hand to her chest. "This isn't happening..."

"I kissed you for the first time in this very spot," he continued, smiling. He could feel his throat tighten. His nervousness had transcended to a sort of reflective, happy sadness. And he knew his cheeks were ruddy and hot.

"This isn't a stuffy, pretentious restaurant," he said. "This is our beginning...this is us, Tallie. No girl was every good enough...no girl could match you...Sophia hated you for a reason..."

They both laughed, and she wiped her tears away.

"I want you in my life every day, every night, for the rest of my life, baby," he told her. "Will you marry me...?"

She sniffled, dropped to her knees and shook her head in disbelief.

He then remembered what it felt like the last time. She wasn't ready; how foolish he was.

She looked up into his eyes and smiled. "You already know what my answer is...give me that ring..."

Chapter 17

AMID THE
FIREFLIES



SHE EMBRACED THE SUMMER DAYS. The heat covered her brown skin, the sun glowed overhead, and the breeze bended to its lazy rhythm.

Her head was in Mama's lap, and they swayed on the porch swing together, and watching the sun set over the Bradford pears, the sky a fusion of pink and amber, the drone of an airplane passing by. Mama rubbed her head with her hand, slowly, soothingly, gently.

This is the way that it had been for years right? Natalie and her mama, together on the porch, watching the sunset, reflecting on life, the daughter, wanting to be so much like her, whose voice, deep and rooted and smooth, was just breathy enough to soothe her, with just a touch of southern soul.

She was never a disappointment, was she?

No ma'am.

When Sidney and Maya left the house without telling her, where was Nattie? In the house, under her mama, where she belonged, avoiding trouble, waiting for the moment that she and Mama could go to the porch and watch the sky fall, hear the crickets, witness the lightning bugs flourish in the summertime, laugh at Sid and Maya while they chased them around the magnolia-laden front yard. And when Mama lay crying on the kitchen floor, mentally and physically defeated, after Papa had slammed his fist into the side of her mother's face, seven-year-old Nattie was at her mother's feet, while Sidney and Maya locked themselves in the back bedroom. She had not quite understood the despair her mother felt at the time. She

now blamed her youth and her forced ignorance. Though it made her angry, she chose not to think about why her daddy beat on her mama that way. She only wanted to believe the best of her father. She'd go to sleep praying to God that they'd be fine in the morning, that Mama wouldn't have a black eye, that Daddy would lift her into his arms, while mama fixed breakfast, kiss the side of her face and declare her his querido.

She had her mother's eyes. Everyone said so. They were narrow and they twinkled when the sun hit them just right. And everyday Granny Marie reminded her that she had her mama's laugh, shared the same sweet drawl, had her round butt, her narrow hips, her slim waist.

"I swear, Nattie," Granny would say. "You're startin' to scare me, you look so much like your mama!"

She couldn't tell her yet.

But, she had to, didn't she? Brandon David Greene had to exist in her Mama's heart.

It had taken her several days for her to actually comprehend it herself. Were she and Brandon Greene really serious about getting married? Did she really drop Anthony without a second thought to the consequences?

Brandon hadn't given that Reina girl a second thought.

He'd managed to convince Natalie that he'd met Reina Crutchfield through one of Scotty's coworkers at the radio station. She was bold like Sophia, had her same sneaky charm, which probably explained why she'd managed to get him into

bed the same night as their first dinner date at Finnegan's. Reina was simple-minded, shallow, and when she wasn't sweeping fertilizer off of the floor at a plant store on Crest, she was calling him, begging him for another nightcap. Somehow, in the three weeks that they were seeing each other, Reina had managed to start calling him her "boyfriend" to her silly girlfriends. He didn't correct her as much as he wanted to. Unlike Natalie, she gave him the attention he craved. But, he had no trouble leaving her the night that Natalie appeared at the pond, looking scared and flustered.

There was no other way – Helen Chandler had to understand.

Mama needed to know that Brandon Greene was now her life, that she loved him. She loved every piece of him!

She'd invited Brandon to the fish fry that Sunday.

"Tal, what the hell is a 'fish fry'?"

"It's just what it sounds like...there is fish being fried, Brandon."

"I don't really eat fish, let alone, of the fried persuasion..."

"I'm sure they will put on a hot dog for you."

"Ah hell, I'll be there then...Sunday?"

"Sunday..."

"You're quiet, Nattie," Mama said in her low voice.

Was that anything out of the ordinary? Was she not naturally quiet? Shouldn't Mama have known that?

Natalie sighed and raised her head from her mama's lap. The breeze picked up, hit her cheeks, made a soft whistling noise.

She didn't look at her mama.

"Why are you so quiet, girl?" her Mama asked, reaching out to her face.

Natalie shrugged her shoulders childishly. Ordinarily, this was the moment that Natalie could tell her mother anything that ached her heart, anything that threatened her solace; however, she was blessed with very few grievances, aside from troubles with her schoolwork, her job, her sisters.

But, she was thinking. She was thinking about how to explain a person like Brandon to her mother. Was it not simple? He's tall, Mama...really tall...he's got really dark hair and really light eyes...and he's white, Mama...but oh, he's beautiful, Mama...he's really, really beautiful...

Simply telling Helen Marie Chandler that she loved Brandon Greene wouldn't be enough.

Her mother was no sucker for a good love story.

Mama began to stroke her head a little harder. "Natalie..."

Natalie sighed again. "Mama..."

"Yes, girl?"

She then turned to her Mama. This is it! She needed to do it! Her Mama looked so peaceful. What a rarity these days it seemed. How could she ruin that?

The breeze carried her hair a little bit...she heard Brandon's voice saying that he loved her...she rolled her eyes closed.

In her mind, they are together at the beach, he is holding her hand, their foreheads are touching, she doesn't want to be anywhere else, she knows then that she wants to be with him.

"Mama..."

"Yes, child? What on earth's got your mind so fixed?"

Mama chuckled a little.

"Mama...I..."

"Natalie Savannah! Say it, girl!"

The phone rang.

Natalie opened her eyes, exhaled deeply; Mama raised and went into the house to answer it.

She can't do it. She won't say a word when Mama returns. She'll suggest dinner...yes! Dinner! They'll go to Martin's for seafood...then maybe a movie. Maya's coming home tonight...what a perfect distraction! She will tell Mama tomorrow.

The mood isn't right.

Mama returned, holding the phone to her chest. She is giving Natalie a cross look.

"Natalie Chandler...it's for you...it's Brandon...your fiancé..."

...

Mama didn't lose it until they got into the Buick to pick up Maya from the airport. Her sister had flown cross-country to visit a friend at another art school in San Francisco. She gripped the steering wheel with such force, Natalie was sure that her mama would break it. Natalie only sat quietly, refused to look at her mama. She winced every time her mama huffed.

"I don't understand where I went wrong! It was that school. I told your grandmother that you weren't ready to be around all those white people...you might catch something... and you did! You caught you a big ol' honky didn't you, child?"

Natalie didn't answer. She knew better.

"How long have you known this boy? Probably no more than two minutes and you want to marry him? Do you think that this boy will take care of you, girl? Do you think that he'll stay around once you punch out a couple of dark babies? This is a game to these boys, girl. Don't you understand that? I don't understand, Natalie...you had direction, you had fire... you want to give all of that up for a white boy? Mama taught you better than that. And you give him our home number? Where's your sense, girl? You have to call it off! Call it off before you get hurt! You can't trust them. Did you sleep with this boy? Is that what this is all about?"

"No, of course not, Mama..."

"You aren't pregnant?"

"No, Mama..."

“You two don’t make sense...no kind of sense! Who else knows of this...do his parents know?”

Natalie nodded. “I will meet them in a couple of weeks...”

“And? What do you think they’ll think?”

“Well, it might be shocking to them initially but they’ll come around...”

“Exactly! Do you think they want a little black girl in their family? Tainting their image? *No*...they want a little pasty white girl to go along with their little pasty white boy!”

Natalie shook her head. Mama saw her defiance. “Oh, it’s not true? It’s not true, Natalie? You think the two of you will be different, huh? I bet you think you and this Brandon will change the world, don’t you? This is a cold world, Natalie Chandler...face the reality! You two will never last...he will abandon you!”

Natalie continued to shake her head. She didn’t want to cry...Lord, have mercy...she didn’t want to cry.

There was silence between them. It was the first time that Natalie begin to realize that her mother was wrong; and she begin to question all of the others times...was she wrong then?

The silence wasn’t broken again until Maya was in the car. This time, Mama was enraged. The first person she’d told about her engagement to Brandon was Maya, who’d met Brandon a couple of years back, on a weekend visit to UGA.

“How old is he?” Her Mama asked.

“Twenty-six, Ma,” Natalie told her mother, looking at her sister. “He’s twenty-six...”

“Mama, times have changed! Nat loves this boy! Why can’t you see that?” Maya said.

“I refuse to see it, Maya,” their mama said. “I refuse to believe that my daughter, the one with the most sense in my house, would do such a thing.”

“She didn’t commit murder, Mama,” Maya defended in her soft voice. “She just fell in love.”

Oh yes, falling in love...what a travesty! Such a bad child!

“She’s being foolish,” their mama said.

“You haven’t even met the boy yet, Mama.”

“And have you? Has that white boy got you fixed too? The both of you...so different from Sidney.”

Maya nodded. “I have...he’s great. You really should meet him before you pass judgment.”

“Can’t I? Isn’t he the one who’s trying to snatch my baby away?”

“You shouldn’t look at it like that, Mama,” Maya said.

“You should look at it like, Nat’s found a great guy, Nat’s happy, and you should be happy for her...”

Mama rolled her lips in tightly, Natalie saw her grip the wheel again, and the two daughters said nothing more.

She called Brandon that night and she cried to him.

“I’ll be there soon,” he said in a low comforting voice. She wished he were there then, as she sat on the floor, leaned against her bed, the window above her headboard cracked, letting the night air in.

She knew that if he were there, he'd be holding her, he'd be kissing the side of her face over and over, the smell of his proximity would overwhelm her. That is what she wanted for the rest of her life.

...

The next morning, she had Granny's straw hat atop her head, straight hair coiling at the scalp from the heat, brown skin moistened, glistening, darkening under the sun. She knelt near her grandmother in the rose garden behind her yellow house at the dead-end of Hargrove at midday, hands engrossed in hybrid teas of reds and pinks and yellows, pruning, while her grandmother, sat in an old rocking chair, sipping lemonade.

She hadn't said much to Grandma Marie since she got there. She only acknowledged the kids on their bicycles, bickering at each other as they raced toward the sound of the ice cream truck, perhaps no more than a couple of streets over. After all, that is what she and her two sisters did as children whenever they visited their grandmother in their younger years. Yes, the three Chandler sisters, fighting with the little Harold boys who lived next door, arguing over who could get to the truck the fastest, with their Granny Marie, standing on her front wraparound porch, yelling at her grandchildren to stop messing with the boys and come in for lunch.

Sid was always the fastest, and young Nattie, three years behind her, stayed behind to make sure that Maya, only a few years shy of being a toddler, was okay. Her legs were always considerably short.

A breeze picked up, her grandmother knelt beside her, handed her a glass, the ice cream truck neared, and Natalie collapsed on her bottom.

"Tell me about him," her grandmother began.

Natalie pursed her lips, took a deep sip from the glass, and looked toward the backyard. The trees were scarce and the birdhouses hung low from branches, bouncing delightfully with the wind.

"He's Brandon...and I want to marry him..."

"I got that much, young lady," her soft-spoken grandmother chuckled. "I want to know more about *him*..."

Natalie sighed and turned in her grandmother's direction. Granny, rosy-cheeked, smooth-skinned and narrow-eyed, smiled sweetly.

"He's from upstate New York...he has three brothers...he's Roman Catholic...he's really good at soccer...he makes me laugh...he gives good hugs...and I want to marry him..."

"Do you love him?"

She took another sip, slowly, replaced her drink on the length of her leg, and whispered, "More than anyone will ever realize..."

“Well...that’s all you need...and that’s all I care about... oh...wait...is he good-looking?”

Natalie giggled. She didn’t understand why, at the sound of her grandmother’s laugh and the thought of Brandon’s smile, she allowed a tear to roll down her face.

“He must be...shoot...the boy brings tears to your eyes...I want to see pictures.”

She had just one in her purse...

Jekyll Island, Spring Break, 2002.

She was in her yellow bathing suit. Her skin baked that day. He was in those pretty blue shorts with the white hibiscus flowers. He tanned very well. She didn’t *do* water...she remembered the moment that he walked into the waves with her slowly, coaching her each step, as if she were a child.

They’d emerged from the waves, she, gathered in his big arms, smelling the salt from his body, and Scotty was there to capture the moment.

She handed the picture to Granny, and she examined it for minutes. Then she smiled. “Oh, he’s somethin’ fine to look at, isn’t he? *Of course* you love him, you’d be stupid not to, huh? And Granny taught you better than that, didn’t she?”

She nodded. Granny took her hand.

“She’ll come around,” she said. “If you love him, if you’re happy, your mother will come around.”

She only nodded again. This time, her throat hardened.

“My girl’s a stubborn little thing, isn’t she? She’s always been that way...mean as a rattlesnake, my Helen. And all she’s

got is you three girls...Sidney’s in Columbia, Maya’s in Savannah becoming an artist...and with you getting married, it’s devastating for a mother, as much as it’s satisfying knowing that you did something right...you did something good with your children...”

“But...he’s *white*...”

“Oh, hosh-posh,” Granny said, slapping the top of her boney hand. “All of a sudden you care? If you cared, Nattie Chandler, you would’ve taken that ring off a long time ago. The only person that should give a damn about that is *you*... and if *you* look him in the eye and all you see is the man you love, then why should you care what other people say? Why should you care what your mama thinks? This is your life, girl...this is your life with him...you’re in this life together...”

...

The green Explorer had no trouble finding the humble brick home on Green Hill Street in the early evening, and she raced outside at sunset, just as he emerged from the driver’s seat, clad humbly in a blue polo shirt and jeans, hair free of product, eyes gleaming in the dazed sunlight. She leapt into his arms like a silly child, took in his smell, the strength of his arms around her, the feel of his lips on her cheek, kissing over and over and over...

Maya and Mama stayed put on the porch.

She took him by the hand and guided him toward them...

Mama did not smile. Brandon gave Maya a small hug. Natalie presented Brandon to her Mama shortly after. “Ma,” Natalie Chandler said, clearing her throat. “This is Brandon Greene...”

Brandon Greene extended his hand with a smile. “It’s a pleasure, Ms. Chandler...”

Helen Chandler looked down at his hand, turned slowly, and ambled back toward the house.

...

He had gotten a small room at the Sheraton in Atlanta, just in case, and she went with him that evening. They ordered room service, and she nestled herself between his legs as they watched a rerun on television.

His hand softly stroked the top of her head as he said, “She hates me...”

“Almost as much as your parents will hate me...”

“How the hell am I supposed to go to a ‘fish fry’ tomorrow if I’m not even welcomed at your home?”

“How the heck am I going to Saratoga Springs, New York?” Natalie asked, placing a hand on his leg. “Because I love you...”

“Yea, I guess that has something to do with it...”

“Exactly.” She kissed the side of his face.

“How am I going to get her to like me, if all she can see is the fact that I’m white?”

“It’s just where we come from, Brandon,” she told him. “It’ll take time...”

This time, she turned her body over and looked up at him. He gave her a quick kiss. “And time is what I got...”

He’d become such a good dancer that it scared her. He took her by the hand, pulled her off of the bed, put in one of his old acoustic CDs, and wrangled her into him.

She had just begun to cry on the bed as they talked...of their future, of them together, of them even making it at all... and he didn’t want to hear it. He only wanted to show her how they’d dance their first dance as husband and wife, reminding her of the nights that he’d whisk her to downtown Atlanta, where’d they’d dance in ambient light until their toes turned blue.

“I want a small wedding,” she whispered into his face. “Just a couple of friends...”

“I want that too,” he whispered back.

“I want my Mama to walk me down the aisle and give me away...”

She grabbed onto his broad shoulders for dear life.

“Mm-hmm, go ahead...”

“I want a small orchestra to play...”

He kissed her cheek this time. “Mm-hmm...”

“I want to vacation in Anguilla...”

“For the...*honeymoon?*” A sleazy grin crossed his face. She nodded, giggling. “Yes, Brandy, for the honeymoon.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged, my darling...”

“I want to scuba dive, water ski, snorkel, parasail...”

“You don’t *do* water, remember?”

“I will for my honeymoon...”

“How about we just...uh...stay close by the room?”

“I can’t promise that...I’m going to do things I’ve never done before...”

“You can do that...in the *room*...”

“Brandon Greene!”

He smiled cheekily. “I’m just making a suggestion, Tal... you know, the wedding’s got to be...*consummated*...”

“When I want it to be...”

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

“Please, boy, I have the rest of my life to do that...*slowly...carefully*...”

“I want a small wedding,” she whispered into his face. “Just a couple of friends...”

“I want that too,” he whispered back.

“I want my Mama to walk me down the aisle and give me away...”

She grabbed onto his broad shoulders for dear life.

“Mm-hmm, go ahead...”

“I want a small orchestra to play...”

He kissed her cheek this time. “Mm-hmm...”

“I want to vacation in Anguilla...”

“For the...*honeymoon?*” A sleazy grin crossed his face. She nodded, giggling. “Yes, Brandy, for the honeymoon.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged, my darling...”

“I want to scuba dive, water ski, snorkel, parasail...”

“You don’t do water, remember?”

“I will for my honeymoon...”

“How about we just...uh...stay close by the room?”

“I can’t promise that...I’m going to do things I’ve never done before...”

“You can do that...in the room...”

“Brandon Greene!”

Her cheeks warmed.

He smiled cheekily. “I’m just making a suggestion, Tal... you know, the wedding’s got to be consummated...”

“When I want it to be...”

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

“Please, boy, I have the rest of my life to do that...*slowly...carefully*...”

...

On Sunday morning, Natalie walked into the church that she grew up in, located on the bend in the road, where the rays of the sun hit the high stained glass windows perfectly, that sat on the same street where which she was raised, a place where she and sisters would stand in the altar after choir practices and take turns walking up and down the aisles pretending that they were brides, and that they were marrying Deacon Julian,

who, twenty-three at the time, light-skinned, greeted them at the door every Sunday.

In the Indian summer, she and her two sisters would run through the falling petals of a Japanese cherry in the yard by the sign that read *Holy Deliverance Baptist Church*. It sat peaceably just a few paces down from Miss Mabel's store on the corner of Duluth and Wade, where her granddaddy played checkers with the rest of the deacon board beneath a big maple tree, when Granny was getting on his nerves.

It was on that same aisle in the church that Natalie stood that warm Sunday in late August, with her white fiancé in tow, and the entire congregation of Green Hill Baptist, staring at her, sending her nerves through loops, as she anxiously awaited the usher's return. She hoped to be seated somewhere in the back, where they couldn't be seen, where they couldn't be talked about, where she and Brandon could be close and she could hold his hand and be silently reassured that they were doing the right thing.

She wished then that the choir wasn't singing her favorite song, and she melted at the moment that she looked up at Brandon and he gave her those *don't-leave-me* eyes, only forcing her to take a deep breath and grip his hand tighter.

The usher returned, with two fans with funeral advertisements printed on each, and with a cautious glance to Brandon, she asked, "Come on, child, while the choir's still singin'...I can find you a seat in the back..."

She followed the elderly woman toward the right-hand, last row pew, placing them down next to a young family with a small girl. Waving her fan nervously with one hand and tapping Brandon's thigh with her other, she searched the other pews, saw her mother, her grandmother and two sisters on a row toward the front. Mama held a hymn book, Granny knew all of the words to the song, Sidney clapped her hands, rocking her body back and forth, Maya held the bible school teacher's baby, James, bouncing him up and down, singing in his ear.

Brandon and Natalie were the only ones seated, and after a few seconds had passed, she raised to her feet, pulled Brandon by the arm up to his feet, and she began clapping her hands, singing the words under her breath, her lips quivering a little, her fingers shaking a little, her arm grazing Brandon's as he stood motionless.

After another song, the choir rocking from side to side, hands raised, voices high, the sun spilling through the stained glass, a vision of the cross at the head of the altar, Natalie's inhibitions began to fall by the wayside, and she wrapped one arm around Brandon's waist.

It was here! Yes, in this moment! *She* was the stronger of the two of them, the comforter, the supporter.

Her heart warmed to the idea that Brandon was now a part of her world...it only made their connection all the more real.

They looked at each other, she sang to his face, and in the midst, she mouthed, *I love you*, watched him reply, and she sang again.

She coaxed him into singing, even poked him a little, but he resisted, smiling a little.

. . .

If he was uncertain about what he was doing there, if he ever wondered if he'd ever fit into this world, he only looked at Natalie's wide grin, that small twinkle in her brown eyes, the way she sang, her faith in the glow of her brown skin, how happy she looked, and was quickly reminded that he belonged there, that he *needed* her, that this venture in the church of her upbringing was only a small stepping stone.

After all, all of the reasoning for his fascination with her were in this area, were with these people, this congregation, a vision of varying browns, voices deep, rooted, songs embedded in the faith, Natalie a product of this vision, Natalie a part of them.

They met up with her family at the steps outside of the church, following the service and he stood off to the side, watched her stand with her sisters, laugh a little, and she held her second cousin, Erica's baby, smiled at it, played with its curls, and she hugged the people who recognized her, who hadn't seen her in ages, who told her that she looked so grown up, just like her mama, whose accents sounded strikingly familiar to hers.

He swallowed hard, placed his hands in his pockets and she looked at him, a grin formed out of the corner of her mouth, and she winked at him. She wore that floppy straw hat that he loved, and her hair had grown to skirt her upper back, and her sundress modestly grazed her knees.

She was an angel, wasn't she? He found it hard then to imagine a time that he didn't want to be with her, that he couldn't see forever with her.

"And who did you come with?" Brandon looked down, saw a woman with dark skin and an obnoxiously blue hat, stood beside him, eyeing him under the large brim.

"Natalie," he murmured.

The woman leaned in closer, an agitated expression crossing her face. "With who, boy?"

"Natalie," he repeated.

"Natalie...Natalie...oh! One of the Chandler girls, of course. You can tell their mother, Helen that if she skips out on tithes again, she'll be off the hospitality committee, for good... you hear me, boy?"

"Bernice, who is this?"

A second woman, shorter than the first, approached the woman's side, studying Brandon as if he were some strange experiment gone wrong.

"I don't know, Fannie," Bernice said. "He said he was with one of the Chandler girls..."

"Pretty girls," Fannie said. "One of them has that loud mouth and that big behind...is that the one you're with?"

Brandon shook his head. “No...with Natalie...I’m with Natalie...”

“Natalie?” Fannie asked.

Brandon nodded. He watched Fannie’s eyes go in the direction of Natalie and her sisters.

“*Oh*, Nattie, Bern! Nattie, the smart one!”

“Oh,” Bern said. “The one that wants to be a doctor?”

“That’s the one,” Fannie said. “The skinny one...”

“Pretty girl,” Bern said with a smile. “What you doing with her?”

“We’re getting...um...”

“Speak up, boy...can’t nobody understand all that mumblin’...”

“Married,” Brandon said. “We’re getting married...”

“*Married?*” Bernice asked, as if she didn’t hear what he’d said. “Now, Helen didn’t say anything about one of her daughters gettin’ married...did she, Fannie?”

“Not that I know of,” Fannie said. “Where do you come from, boy?”

“New York...” Brandon swallowed hard.

“Figured,” Fannie said. “You don’t sound like you’re from here.”

“Nattie must know you from the school? The school in Athens?” Bernice asked.

“Yes, that’s right...”

“You got a job?” Fannie asked. “You look like you have a nice job. Mm-hmm, big money...”

“Yes, I have a job...”

“Bernice and Fannie, if you don’t leave this boy alone...”

A round woman with salt and pepper hair approached, and with round cheeks and small eyes, smiled in Brandon’s direction, placing a hand on his back.

“Can’t you see the boy’s nervous? And here you go interrogatin’ him to death, with all of your meddlin’ questions...let him be!”

The two old women walked away, and Brandon managed a smile in the woman’s direction.

“Thank you,” he said, allowing him to sigh relief.

The woman chuckled heartedly. “Oh, hosh-posh, it’s nothing...”

Brandon looked around, realizing that Natalie had moved to a different location and found her a few seconds later, talking to a younger man under a tree. A small child then ran up to her, attached to her leg, and she began to stroke the child’s head. Brandon smiled.

“She loves you very much, you know...”

Brandon nodded, exhaled deeply, watched the breeze carry Natalie’s hair.

“Not sure that I’ve seen my granddaughter so happy...”

Brandon then turned to the old woman. “You’re her grandmother?”

The older woman chuckled heartedly again. “And you’re Brandon,” she said, smiling. “The young man who’s taken her heart away from me.”

“Am I that easy to point out?”

“The only Caucasian male in an all-black congregation...I’d say the odds were good...”

They both laughed.

“I’ve watched over that girl since her first steps, to the time her father left, to the times she fought with her sisters, through middle school, through high school...and never...never have I seen that girl so fixed...”

“Surely I’m not the cause of that...”

“You had the girl cryin’ the other day...”

Brandon couldn’t remember the last time he blushed.

This instant liking of the woman reminded him of the first encounters with Natalie; how easily he acclimated to her personality, how he reveled in her warmth.

“You have my blessing if you want it...”

Brandon smiled. “Thank you.”

The old woman extended her hand. “Marie Chandler...your new grandmother...”

Natalie approached his side, kissed the side of his cheek, and attached to his arm. She smelled amazing.

“I just met my new grandmother,” he told her.

“Oh?” she asked with a smile.

He nodded. “We have her blessing...”

“So I’ve heard...”

...

Marie Chandler made him help her in the kitchen while Natalie went to her room and changed. Her mother was outside in the yard, arguing with one of Natalie’s uncles about the grill, stationed beneath a lazy poplar, fumbling with white wicker lawn chairs.

The grandmother placed a bowl of chicken pieces before him, instructing him to use the mixture of cayenne pepper and buttermilk set in a measuring container to the left of him.

“Buttermilk,” she said. “Buttermilk is the secret ingredient to the best fried chicken this side of Georgia...just ask my Natalie...she’ll tell you...”

She instructed Brandon to pour the mixture over the chicken and massage it together, making sure that it melded well.

“Buttermilk?” Brandon questioned.

Marie Chandler nodded. “Yes sir, makes the chicken soft, tender, adds a kick...you like ‘kick’ in your food, don’t you, boy?”

“I hope so...”

“You’d better get accustomed to this kind of cooking now, child,” the grandmother smiled. “Because this is all my Nat knows...she’s been helping her granny cook like this her entire life...”

“I have no complaints thus far,” Brandon said.

“Good, good,” she said. “Nattie’s been cookin’ this way since her daddy left so many years ago...”

Brandon saw the opportunity to ask and took it gleefully...

“Who...um...what can you tell me about her father?”

Marie Chandler looked in the young man’s direction.

“What? She hasn’t told you anything?”

Brandon shook his head. “She doesn’t like to talk about him much...”

The grandmother sighed. “Let’s see...it’s been so long since I thought about him...um...name was Raphael...Dominican...I...I told Helen that he was bad news...came up here looking for a job...I knew my girl would fall for him...pretty little boy...I remember that he spoke Spanish real well...had a drinkin’ problem, though...I believe that he liked to snatch around Helen and the girls a couple of times...finally, one night, Helen had had enough and kicked him out...haven’t heard from him since...Natalie was...seven? Yes, Natalie was seven...”

Brandon could feel his insides warm a little. “Did he ever touch Natalie?”

“Can’t say,” Granny sighed. “Nattie, the dear little thing, would never tell...that girl can keep a murder quiet...can tell you one thing...she loved her daddy...took his leavin’ harder than Maya or Sidney combined...”

“But he never touched her...”

Granny only chuckled. “Boy, what did I just say? I don’t know. Goodness gracious, you do care about her...”

He climbed the small flight of stairs, finding her bedroom as the first on the right as her grandmother had instructed. It

was there that he found her, standing in front of her small vanity mirror, combing her hair and messing with her low-slung jeans and tight, white t-shirt.

Knocking on the door lightly, he entered the room, caught eyes with her, entering a room that smelled just like her. There was very little covering the white walls, with the exception of a few small posters, including one with Psalm 27 and a seascape in the background, and a sprinkling of pictures, with some of her mother, grandmother, and her sisters as younger children.

“You can sit somewhere, baby,” she told him, pointing in the direction of the bed.

Brandon Greene watched his fiancée in silence.

“I’m sure my grandmother ran her mouth off about me, hasn’t she?” Natalie asked him, looking at him through the mirror.

Brandon nodded. “She speaks nothing but positive things about you...”

“I’d hope so,” Natalie sighed, placing her comb down. “I think I was her favorite...”

“You were everyone’s favorite,” Brandon said, rolling his eyes.

Natalie shrugged. “What can I say?”

She moved to the bed and took a place beside him, locking her arm with his.

“What do you think?” she asked lowly.

“Of...?”

“Of the house? Of everything! You’ve been so quiet. I hope you’re okay. I’ve been meaning to ask you all day.”

“I’m fine,” he told her, looking down at her.

“Are you sure? You’ll say that and then...”

He leaned in slowly, kissing her forehead. “I’m fine, Tal...”

“Good.”

They kissed. “I hope you’re hungry,” she said. “My uncle’s on his way over to fire up the grill and put a couple of filets on...”

“And how many uncles do you have?”

“Three...Joseph, Martin, and Ronald...my mother’s brothers...you’ll love them...my uncle Marty is the only one that can cook though...and he’s the funniest...now, my uncle Joe always has one Bud Light too many, and will try and dance with us the entire night...been that way since we were kids...and uncle Ronnie is the best spades player...we’re always on the same team...I’m his favorite niece too...”

“Any aunts?”

“Two...Miriam and June...my mama’s sisters, of course...but we just call them Aunt Miri and Aunt Juney...and neither one of them can cook...and they’ve always been jealous of my mama, Helen, because she is the best cook and the prettiest sister, and was the first one to get married, and arguably, my granny’s favorite daughter...”

“And why do you think that?”

“Because she had me!”

“Wow...could your head get any bigger?”

Natalie smiled, kissed the side of his face, and began to pull him by the wrists. “Come on, boy...let’s go downstairs...it’s time to make you a Chandler...”

She’d left him alone for the third time that evening, on the screened porch, having fulfilled his duty to help Uncle Marty light the tiki torches that lined a small brick-laden pathway, leading toward the back porch. He watched Natalie come in and out of the house, carrying various dishes of things he couldn’t recognize, placing them down on the small, rectangular table with a blue nylon cloth atop it, swaying with the evening breeze. She gave him quick glances as she passed him, he, who sat quietly in a plastic outdoors chair, smelling fried food, becoming increasingly afraid that he wouldn’t enjoy as much as his fiancé wanted him to. He remained patient, something, of course, that was very foreign to him, but hoped Natalie saw that he was trying. Maya, small-figured, squeaky-voiced and round-faced, sat down on the opposing chair near him, sighing.

He remembered the first time that he met Natalie’s little sister. She’d come up from Savannah to visit her sister one weekend in the spring. She was a teenager fresh out of high school. She had shoulder-length brown hair, round eyes and big cheeks, and her smile was enough to light an entire city. She had three piercings in each of her light brown ears, had a tattoo of her name in Arabic on her left toe and three crosses

around her neck. She'd looked preppy-dressed Brandon over once, smiled and said, "So, you're Brandon..."

She was most certainly the more noticeable Chandler sister, but she wasn't one to vie for attention. She was demure in a way that softened her beautiful features, that made her approachable and kind.

She, the more affectionate of the Chandler sisters, he'd discovered shortly, touched his leg lightly. "Do you need something to do?"

Desperately, he thought. He needed Natalie to sit beside him more than anything, give his back a little stroke, make him believe that those strange, crossed glances that Helen Chandler gave him from the grill outside of the porch, were all in his head.

"I think that it would be smart for me to stay put," he told the youngest sister, with the youthful face.

Maya tapped his leg. "Nonsense," she told him. "You should get up and do something. I think Mama needs some help moving the grill, and all of our uncles are too drunk to help..."

They both looked in the direction of where the mother stood, she, who fumbled with the cover, having to toss her tongs aside.

Brandon sighed. "Like I said, it might be smart for me to stay here."

Maya smiled. "You're afraid of my mama, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily," Brandon stumbled. "I would just like to stay here. Besides, it's cooler under here."

"You've been living in Athens for how long, and you haven't gotten used to the heat yet?"

"Nor the mosquitoes..."

"Oh, why is Natalie marrying you?"

Helen Chandler looked him over once, sighed, and dropped her hands. "Here, boy," she told him. "Give it a try..."

Brandon took a hold of the grill with one swift movement, moved it in the direction that the mother had instructed, and clapped his hands together when he was finished.

They looked at each other and Helen Chandler didn't say a word, only walked away, in the direction of the screened porch.

Natalie had watched the entire thing from where she stood, had shrugged her shoulders in his direction and had attempted a smile of comfort.

Helen and Marie Chandler grilled and fried till the sun fell lowly beneath the magnolias, and the crickets cried, and the fireflies danced about the small backyard, the torches aglow around them, the large Chandler clan, with the chuckling aunts, and the drunken uncles and the skidding cousins, aged young and old, all arranged in plastic outdoor furniture in a cluster, feasting on Styrofoam plates of fried chicken, fish filets,

potato chips and baked beans, R&B unfamiliar to him, playing from a stereo in the kitchen.

And Natalie was beside him, having finished her plate, her hand on his leg, claiming him, them, equally exhausted from all of the questions about the wedding, all of which, neither of them could answer, none of which, Mother Helen enjoyed hearing.

After awhile, Natalie removed herself from beside him, got to her feet, her two sisters, following suit, and they began collecting the plates from the other guests, Maya, the playful one, doing a slight two-step to one of the songs she recognized on the radio, singing along with the melody.

“Maya, could you please let the artist sing that song?” Natalie teased, gathering the plates into a neat little stack.

The youngest Chandler sister rolled her eyes, clicked her teeth and said, “You’re just jealous, Nat...you’re just afraid that Brandon will like my singing so much that he’ll leave you...”

Brandon managed a smile and Natalie looked in his direction, winking.

“Please, young one,” Natalie told her sister. “It’s going to take a lot more than singing to pull him away from me...”

He agreed. He couldn’t think of anything that could tear him away. He watched the sisters take their individual stacks of plates into the kitchen.

Brandon swallowed hard.

“So, Brandon, that’s your name, right?” Uncle Marty began, taking a swig of beer.

Brandon nodded. “Yes, sir...it is...”

“Brandon,” Uncle Marty repeated, his accent vividly southern. “He’s too tall...you think he’s too tall?”

The uncle looked in the direction of one of the Chandler aunts. The aunt smiled a crooked one, nodded in agreement, and murmured, “He is tall...how tall are you, boy?”

“Six-four,” Brandon said quietly.

“Really tall, huh, Miriam?” an aunt said, looking at the other.

“Yea, June, he is,” the aunt said, glancing Brandon over. “But Natalie’s tall...”

“She is tall,” Uncle Marty, a stout, balding man with the darkest complexion, said. “Why is that girl so tall, Helen?”

Helen did something funny with her eyes, cleared her throat, and readjusted her position in her chair. “Her father was tall...”

The Chandler clan fell silent for a moment; some nodded their heads slowly.

Brandon could tell that this Raphael character had not only affected Helen Chandler’s life, but the rest of them as well.

Then they all turned their attention to Brandon again.

“He’s a big boy, too, Miri,” the other aunt said.

That aunt nodded and pursed her brown lips. “How much you weigh, boy?”

“I haven’t weighed myself in a long time,” Brandon admitted.

“Give us an estimate, honey,” Marie Chandler chimed in.

Brandon sighed and searched his mind. While he came up with a solid estimate, he also attempted to think about why his weight mattered.

“Uh, two-fifteen,” Brandon claimed. “About two-fifteen...”

“You ever play football? You should be playing football...” Uncle Marty asked him, cracking open another can.

“No, sir, never played...”

“Basketball?”

“When I was in high school, sir...”

The uncles then joked about picturing him standing under the goal and doing nothing more than tossing them into the basket. They laughed about this for at least three minutes. Brandon, all the while, didn’t find it funny.

“Where are you from?” one of the aunts asked.

“Saratoga Springs.”

“Where on earth is that?”

“New York, ma’am...”

“I thought so,” the aunt said. “You didn’t sound like you were from here...”

“Don’t look like it either,” another aunt said. “He don’t look like one of those country boys...”

“How’d you and Nattie meet?” Uncle Joe asked.

“At school,” Brandon told him. Brandon certainly left out the part where he was belligerently drunk, had knocked her unconscious, and then proceeded to drag her into the woods like some madman.

He simply said, “I was a junior and she was a freshman...”

“Nattie was that young?” one of the aunts asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Brandon replied. “We’ve been friends for a long time...”

“Friends, huh?” Uncle Ronnie asked. “What happened to that other boy she brought home that one time?”

“The light skinned one?” one of the aunts asked. “I was thinking the same thing....”

Brandon was too. Natalie never got around to telling him how she got to the house on Trent road, how she broke up with Anthony. As a matter of fact, she never mentioned him. Brandon then made a mental note to ask about him later... that is, if he could get through all these damn questions!

“He wasn’t for Natalie,” Marie Chandler interjected. “And we must respect that...isn’t that right, Brandon?”

Brandon smiled a little. “Yes, ma’am, that’s absolutely right...”

“And how long were you and Nattie together?” an aunt questioned.

“A year,” Brandon said. “We were together for a year...”

“And what happened? Did you fall on hard times all of a sudden...?”

“Sort of,” Brandon began. “We were the typical young couple and decided that taking a break for awhile was the best thing.”

He figured that giving them a nice answer like that would keep them from probing further, would keep him from picturing in his mind how bad that period of separation was for him, how, deep, deep, down, all he could dream of doing was returning to Natalie.

Natalie’s family all fell silent for a moment, and he couldn’t think of where Natalie and her sisters had gone but wished that they would come back soon.

“Why do you love her?” Helen Chandler, who’d kept silent for most of the conversation, approached him, walking steadily, folding her arms. The absurd question knocked Brandon unsteady for a moment, making it difficult for him to swallow and he only stared at Natalie’s mother for several seconds. He could easily think of a million reasons why, starting with how he felt inside whenever he was around her, or the way she wore her hair, or her unassuming nature. Hell, why did anyone love Natalie Chandler? Was it her gracefulness, her enigmatic silence, her soft glare? Was it everything? Yes, all these things were good, but he assumed that her mother wanted more from him, wanted a more decent, detailed answer, wanted to know exactly where he came from, and how he managed to steal her baby girl away from her so swiftly.

“Natalie makes me happy,” he told the woman.

Not a good answer, Brandon. Try again. Tell her why Natalie Chandler makes you so happy.

“Surely there are plenty of other girls that would make you happy,” Helen Chandler replied. He instantly assumed that she meant other white girls.

Brandon shook his head. Damn it, he couldn’t think of one girl that matched Natalie, could he? But, how could he put those feelings into words that her mother would be satisfied with? And where the hell was Natalie?

“No, ma’am,” Brandon replied. “Just Natalie...only Natalie...”

Bran, you have to do a little better than that. Think hard, you bastard. It’s Natalie, for chrissake! The girl who used to put up with your drunk ass in college, who would pick you up when you and Scotty got stranded at a bar, who would help you with your math equations when you got stuck, who would force you to study even when you didn’t want to, who would listen to you whine and moan about Sophia when she didn’t even want to, who cooked for you even when she couldn’t afford groceries, who made you laugh, even when you didn’t want to...

You don’t live in a perfect world, Brandon Greene, but Nat’s as close as you’re going to get to perfection.

“She’s special,” he told the mother, who had begun to tap her foot, making him feel even more nervous. “She’s light, she’s air, she takes care of me...she listens, she’s incredibly smart, she’s focused, and she gives me the space that I need

sometimes...she's an excellent cook, I love her smile, she's beautiful...and she's been my best friend for as long as I can remember..."

Good answer, Bran. Look at her face, she's speechless!

"Got my vote," Uncle Marty chuckled, letting out a long belch.

"Mine too," Uncle Joe agreed.

"I guess he's alright," one of the aunts sighed.

"But you do understand, boy, that if I ever hear about you doing something to that girl, I'll kill you," Uncle Ronnie said.

Brandon nodded compliantly. "Of—of course..."

Then Helen Chandler narrowed her eyes. Uh-oh...

"Do you even realize how hard it's going to be for the both of you?"

"Of course," Brandon said again. "I've thought about it several times...but we can manage..."

"I'm not talking about the money, I'm talking about what you look like..."

He thought about it, of course. But, ignorantly enough (maybe), he'd never thought much of Natalie being any different than him, other than the fact that her silence drove him completely out of his mind sometimes. Other than that, Natalie was simply the same: analytic and nerdy and soft and sweet, all in one.

"What people think doesn't matter," he told her strongly. "And I've tried to stress that to Nat several times...it's all about us, and our happiness, and our marriage..."

"And what of her family, huh?" the mother questioned. "What happens to us? Do we get shoved out of the picture simply because we disagree...?"

"Are you talking about the family, Ms. Chandler, or just you?"

Helen Chandler pursed her lips, and she could hear the mother's brothers and sisters make a small noise of surprise. But Brandon Greene never took his eyes away from the mother, could feel his heart pounding relentlessly, could feel the sweat form at his brow...and where the hell was his fiancée?

"Yes, I'm white," Brandon told the woman. "But why should that make me any less capable of taking care of your daughter? I believe that something you fail to realize is that I love your daughter. And I definitely wouldn't be sitting here right now, taking this from you, if it weren't for her. She's in good hands, Ms. Chandler. Very good hands. I've most certainly placed taking care of her as one of my top priorities. And the day you start believing that, will be the day that you'll be able to let your daughter go. I'm marrying her, Ms. Chandler. I'm marrying her because I've always wanted to, because I can't imagine spending the rest of my life with another person. And the sooner you start acknowledging that and acknowledging me, the better off you'll be...excuse me..."

He removed himself from the wicker chair, dusted himself off, and headed in the direction of the house. He walked all the way through the house, and when he didn't see Natalie, he

placed himself on the curb outside of Marie Chandler's house on Hargrove, in the darkness, fireflies dancing around him peacefully. Brandon lowered his head, cupped his face in his hands and exhaled. He had to clear his mind, and ask for some greater power to forgive him for saying those things to Helen Chandler. But he meant every word. He knew that this would take time, that everyone wouldn't be able to adhere to the marriage the way that he and Natalie had. But he couldn't wait to get it all over with, couldn't wait for the moment that he said "I do", couldn't wait for the moment that he would be able to run off with Natalie, and not look back. All he had to do, in the meantime, was breathe, and make sure that he didn't step on the wrong toes, say the wrongs things. All he had to do was make sure that he didn't lose Natalie...

She found him, of course, as he knew she would, sitting on the curb, and she sat down next to him, placed her arms around his neck, and pulled him into her, them both sighing, breathing easily together, her head at his.

"I heard what you said," she whispered into him. "And thank you..."

She would always be welcome, he figured. She should know that she should never thank him for the things that he did for her, because they only came naturally. Yes, everything that he did for her...

They would make it, yes. He simply had to keep reminding himself that. He simply had to keep reminding himself that all

he wanted to do was love Natalie, and all of this was because of her.

Chapter 18

IN THE LAND OF
GREENE & GOLD



NATALIE RECEIVED an invitation wrapped in gold and linen on an afternoon where she and Brandon got into a small fight about how much they should spend on living arrangements.

She plopped down onto her bed, read the invitation and couldn't believe it.

Jack and Martha Greene

Together with their four children, Mark, John, Matthew and Brandon, and one grandchild, invite you to celebrate a lifetime of love

40th Wedding Anniversary

October 15, 2005, 6pm

At The Inn at Saratoga

Please bring memories and photos to share

RSVP by phone; please call, Brandon Greene—740.252.0398

She then formulated another reason to be upset with her fiancé. She went into the kitchen, grabbed the phone from its post on the wall, and dialed the ten-digit number.

“Hello?”

“And why didn't you tell me that you were throwing this party for your parents?”

“Because I'm not,” he said, clearing his throat. “My stupid brother put my phone number down so I could get flooded with emails from a bunch of snobby octogenarians.”

“Oh.”

“And you're coming.”

“I'm sure your parents would love that.”

“Already been taken care of. You're my date. We're officially announcing our engagement then.”

“Do we really have to?”

“Yes, Natalie Chandler,” he chuckled. “If you want to get in good with my parents, you have to humiliate yourself, slightly.”

“I can't afford a plane ticket right now, Brandon.”

“Taken care of.”

“Don't have a dress. You know, I'm saving up for this little thing called our wedding. Since my mother really isn't into the whole wedding thing right now. Did you forget?”

“You can get one when you get here. All taken care of.”

“You really want me to come?”

“Yes, Natalie! What kind of question is that?”

“Because, although I haven't met your parents, I can anticipate that this initial meeting will be a complete surprise to them...”

“This trip will be fine. And besides, you'll finally get to meet my brothers. They ask about you all the time. They want to know who this black girl is that's got me all shook up.”

“Aren't they all married?”

“Not all. Matt isn't. He refuses to be.”

“So, basically, he'll be the one to talk you out of marrying me.”

“Tal, once he meets you, he'll want to marry you himself.”

“Ha, we'll see about that.”

“I’ll be back in Georgia at the end of the week. Pick me up from the airport?”

“And stay where? Surely not at my apartment.”

“What? Oh, right...you’re still mad about that fight. Six hundred sounds fine.”

“And we can look at the places that I want to look at?”

“Yes, fine...that’s fine,” he sighed. “I can agree to this now because we won’t be living in Georgia, will we?”

“Nope...it’s Chapel Hill, North Carolina for us...”

“Never been...heard it’s nice...”

“Me too,” she agreed. “So start looking for a job...”

“Fine, fine,” he huffed. “My flight arrives at two in the afternoon. Can you be on time for once?”

“Possibly...”

“Well, hell, I guess I’ll see you at three. I love you.”

“Love you more,” she said with a teasing smile to herself. “Goodbye.”

Brandon and Natalie caught an early flight out of Athens, the morning of October 13th, two days before the anniversary party and just three days following Natalie’s twenty-third. They caught a connector flight in Newark and arrived in Albany sometime just before lunchtime. From there, they caught a cab to the Greene palace in Saratoga, Brandon, pointing out various landmarks, including the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, where his mother, a former ballet dancer, worked and performed in when she was younger.

The Spa City was nestled at the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, a city known for its quiet sway. She felt as if she’d stepped into a Louisa May Alcott story, like *Little Women*. Every building seemed to adhere to the same theme of the Victorian era. It was a land dotted with mineral springs and ridged bridges crossing them. The population was a staggering ninety-three percent white, as Natalie read before her visit, making her throat feel parched.

They passed Saratoga Springs High School, a long brick edifice that had been renovated recently, since he graduated in the early summer of 1997, where he played varsity basketball all four years.

“I wasn’t any good,” Brandon told her, smiling. “I was tall, so they stuck me right under the goal, so I could just toss the ball in. I was the tallest boy in the entire school. Soccer was my saving grace. I only used basketball to get the ladies. How’s that for embarrassing?”

“I can see that,” Natalie told him, reaching for his hand. “I’ve seen you play with Scotty...it’s not a pretty sight...”

He then pointed out a pond, a couple of miles from his house, fenced in by blooming trees, where he said that when he was ten, he fell in and would have drowned, had it not been for his father, who just so happened to be driving by and saw him.

“Well, thank God,” Natalie replied, squeezing his hand tightly.

The Greene house was located in a small development called Hartford Retreat, set on over twenty acres of forested land, including a private lake in the back, and the cab pulled into a long, winding driveway, gliding down the concrete incline, to a house, perched beneath a heavily wooded lot, the brick domicile, bathed in speckled morning sunlight.

Brandon and Natalie looked at each other, but remained silent, and then they each removed themselves from the car, she, slowly examining the house of Brandywine brick and forest green shutters with her eyes, trying to picture Brandon living there, seeing it perfectly. She felt her heartbeat then, felt it clearly, watched Brandon pay the cab fare, watched him retrieve their bags from the trunk, she took her bag from him, and reached for his free hand nervously.

“Just breathe,” he told her quietly.

And she nodded, and tried, took a few deep breaths at a time, but she only grew more nervous, started to picture what the Greene’s actually looked like, fearing how they would treat her, hoping that they were as nice and cool-natured as her Brandon was.

They approached the front door, and Brandon placed his bag down, sighed, and rang the doorbell twice. Natalie licked her dry lips slowly.

It wasn’t long before they heard the light patter of feet coming toward the door. And the door opened, and a tall, white-haired man appeared behind it, he, who shared Brandon’s easy

features, t-shaped build and thick hair. He smiled at Brandon, and then looked in Natalie’s direction, glancing her over once.

After a short pause of complete silence, Brandon cleared his throat, glanced down at her and said, “Dad, this is Natalie, my fiancée.”

Mr. Greene’s face did something funny and he murmured, “Oh, dear,” between two, thin beige lips. He then sighed, turned his head in the direction of the interior and yelled, “Martha! Your son’s home! And he’s got a fiancée!”

...

Natalie Chandler, the poor girl, now felt her difference, now felt darker than ever, as she sat in the living room on their stiff cream-colored Brookshire sofa, twiddling her thumbs. Her throat was dry; no one had offered her a drink. His parents, as lofty in height and build as their son was, had barely looked at her, had barely glanced her over. Instead, they’d ushered their son into another room, obviously close, because she could still hear their voices, could hear her knight in shining armor cursing at his parents, something she would never dream of doing to her mama, her grandmother, any one of older age and importance to her.

“I want Nat to be my wife, why can’t you understand that?”

“She comes from a different place, son! A very different place...”

“Why the hell does that matter? She’s beautiful, she’s well-educated, she wants to be a doctor...hell, she’s more motivated than Mark and John and Matthew put together!”

“That’s not the point!”

“Well what is the point, mother? Why don’t you say it! Why don’t you both just say what’s really on your mind...?”

Her heart warmed to the way he was defending her, though she still thought that things would be easier if she hadn’t chosen this....

A door creaked, and the three lofty figures appeared in the living room seconds later, all three with the same spent expressions on their faces.

Natalie Chandler climbed to her feet, clasped her hands behind her back, swallowed hard, and Brandon pinching her elbow between his big hand, pushed her slightly forward, clearing his throat.

“Now, mother, father, this is Natalie...Natalie Chandler, my fiancée...”

She tried to smile, tried really hard, knew that it looked very fake, but didn’t care. She was finally meeting his parents! And this is the way they treat her?

They were Jack and Martha Greene, proud parents of four handsome sons, him being the youngest, and the most promising. Will run Greene Contracting...

Their hair, similarly white, snow-white, both thin, both stiff, the father, who was probably once very handsome when

he was younger, wore a cashmere sweater, warm brown, making his skin appear as pasty as possible; the mother, who looked even more stiff than the father, arms crossed coldly, in a pale green tea-length dress, short curly hair, which fell across her icy blue eyes naturally, tight-lipped.

They hated her. They despised her. They wanted her out of their lives. She was the typical story: she was financially modest, she was boney, she was quiet, she was black. Not too dark of course. Heck, if she were any darker, would she have even been invited into the home? She was still black, a “darky”, with dominant genes, which meant that they would have a dark grandchild; a first in the Greene dynasty, and that was obviously something that they weren’t ready for.

Jack Greene extended his hand to her, hesitantly, and her prince still held onto her a little. She attempted to smile again.

“Natalie,” the tall man said in a deep voice. “Jack Greene...welcome to Saratoga Springs.”

She did some type of old-fashioned curtsy, like some dumb girl who couldn’t speak, and she continued her fake smile. She turned her attention to the mother, of whom she was most afraid of, of whom the son had an elevated affection for.

Martha Greene extended her hand as well to the boney girl, cautiously, as if she’d get cooties.

“Martha Greene...pleased to meet you, Natalie Chandler...”

Why did she say her name like that? So pained? So formal? Had they yet to accept that she was about to be a part of their lives?

“Please, come have a seat, Ms. Chandler...we’ve heard a lot of about you,” the mother said. So, she did.

Her man, confident, sexy, aggressive, sits next to her on the sofa facing his parents, and he puts his arm gallantly around her, owning her, claiming her.

She stared ardently at the Greenes glaring back.

“So our son tells us you want to be a doctor,” Martha Greene said, crossing her legs with graceful sophistication.

Natalie nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And you’re from?” the father questioned, leaning in.

“Decatur, sir. Decatur, Georgia.”

She didn’t want her accent to get the best of her, so she did her best to remain as sophisticated as possible.

“Ah, how quaint,” the mother said, half-smiling.

Then came the silence, the awkward kind. And her gallant Brandon cleared his throat and spoke.

“Nat applied to five different medical schools and got into all of them,” the son began. “She’s decided to go to Duke.”

“Where did you apply, Natalie?” The father asked in the same deep voice that her son dons, which, of course, drives her mad.

All of the places that her mama didn’t want her to go.

“John’s Hopkins, Harvard, Wake Forest, Duke, and University of North Carolina, sir.”

“Well, that’s very impressive, Natalie,” Martha Greene said.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Now, can I pose a question to you both?”

“Of course you can, Mother,” the son replied.

“Natalie has decided to go to Duke for medical...will you move to North Carolina, son?”

“Yes.”

“She will be in school a number of years,” Jack Greene said.

“I don’t care.”

“What about the business? You’ve said your entire life that that’s what you want to do...take over Jack’s business.”

She looked at him for the first time since they got into the house. Her stomach fell.

“Well,” the son began, still looking at her. “Things change. I can put the business on hold for a few years before I try and run it. I go where she goes.”

“That is not wise.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about the money and I don’t care about the business as much as I thought I did.”

Both his parents were silent. They will not start an argument now; they will wait until they can have their son alone again. They are far too sophisticated for a public altercation.

“Very well then,” Martha Greene said, tossing her wispy-white hair out of her eyes.

The son took Natalie’s hand.

“How did you two meet?” Jack Greene asked. “Class? An organization? Dormitory?”

Oh, no, it was nothing like that...it was all a mistake, a humongous accident.

The old Greene couple listened intently to the story of the young engaged couple; how they met, how they came to be, why Natalie had that ring on her finger, why Brandon now hated Sophia. And when they finished, Brandon’s parents only looked at each other silently, Martha Greene’s small mouth, a gaping mess. Jack Greene turned to glance at his son, visibly attempting to search for the right words.

“What an...uh...interesting story,” said the snow-white Jack Greene. “So...it happened just like that? Just like you explained? Brandon invited you to our little party and here you are.”

Brandon looked at his Natalie, smiled warmly, turned back to his furrow-browed father and nodded slowly, “Yes, Dad, just like that...”

“It’s unusual, we know,” Natalie Chandler told them. “But, we also know that our getting together is...um...unusual, as well...”

“A surprise, surely,” Martha Greene said.

The white and polished Greene coupling exchanged glances; the mother’s legs crossed tightly, the father clearing his throat nervously. Natalie sat impossibly close to her fiancé on the family’s impossibly uncomfortable cream Brookshire sofa,

and his large hand moved to her upper thigh, causing the fair Mrs. Greene to part her lips slightly.

“Have you two set a date, then?”

Brandon and Natalie, then, exchanged glances, realizing that they hadn’t spoken much about any wedding at all.

“No,” Brandon Greene told his parents.

“No?” Martha Greene clarified.

Both the prince and the Georgia peach shook their heads like sheepish children.

Silence fell upon the room, and lasted for many, many seconds, Natalie, the poor girl, feeling her comfort level and equally her confidence falling by the wayside.

Then, Mrs. Greene looked upon her son’s face, which matched her own, caution tickling her throat, and said, “Brandon, you must realize that this is strange for us...as much as it is for her, I’m sure...”

Her...as if poor Natalie wasn’t even present...

“We didn’t even know that this girl existed,” the mother continued. “And suddenly, you bring her into our home and say that she’s going to be your wife? We thought you were still with Sophia...?”

“Mom, I haven’t mentioned Sophia in a year,” Brandon said. “Shouldn’t that mean something? And ‘she’ has a name...”

The mother fell tight-lipped.

“The reason why I brought her to this house, was so you could get to know her,” he told them, glancing down at his fian-

cée once. “And I trust that you’ll get to know her. I understand that this may be shocking...but...I love her...and I want you to see it as much as I feel it...”

Their meeting showed slight success when Natalie was invited to stay for dinner. Then, she figured that they had no choice but to invite her in, because she had nowhere else to go. Elation also warmed her, when she heard the news of being invited to stay in the guest bedroom for a couple of nights. Martha Greene herself, Brandon and his tiny brown companion in tow, were shown the comfortable bedroom, draped in pastel colors, a wrought iron sleigh bed, fanciful curtains, and a picturesque view of a small lake on the backside of the house. Brandon Greene, who’d been carrying her bag, laid it down on the bed, instructed her that his room was past the hall bathroom, to the right, if she needed anything. He had to go pick up his grandmother from the retirement home twenty miles away in the next town over, so she could come for dinner. She then watched his mother fuss over him, messing with his hair, telling him that she’d never liked it when it got too long.

“Mom,” he whined, pushing her hand away. “I like it this way...”

“Well, what happens when you’re going to look for a job? I’ll bet they’ll feel the same way that I do about your hair...”

“It’s fine, right, Tallie?” Brandon asked her. “Tell my mother that it’s fine.”

Of course to Natalie it was fine. If Brandon were bald he would still be just as handsome, because he had that face. She wasn’t sure if she was in the mood to spite the mother so quickly, noticing the way his mother looked at her, as if her opinion of his looks shouldn’t matter at all, and she resisted the urge to reach up and tousle his hair the way she did whenever they were laying around together. Instead, Natalie Chandler looked up at her magnificent-looking fiancé, sighed and said, “Well, it could stand to be a little shorter, baby...”

“Precisely,” Martha Greene said, overly pleased with herself. “I can schedule a haircut for you in the morning. I would like everyone at the anniversary dinner to see the Brandon Greene that they’re used to seeing...”

Brandon only sighed with defeat, shrugged his shoulders and said, “Whatever you say, Mom...”

“Very well then,” Mrs. Greene said, taking her sons arm gingerly. “We should be going...Brandon, you’re driving...”

“Mom, if I drive, Grandmother will drive me crazy...”

“That’s just something you’ll have to deal with...let’s get going.”

Martha Greene started to push Brandon in the direction of the door, but Brandon stopped, and turned to Natalie. He took her shoulder, kissed her goodbye, whispered, “I’ll be back soon...I love you,” into her face and continued his way out the door with his mother, disappearing down the hallway, leaving her to the silence and chill of the bedroom. The whistling breeze hit the small-paned window.

She got the urge to roam the house, following an extended stint, sitting on the bed in the large house, twiddling her thumbs.

She tiptoed toward the bedroom door, peeked out, and stepped out into the hallway, barefoot. A red carpet runner followed the length of the corridor. She stepped slowly, like a little child, pinching at the hem of her slimming ivory tea-length dress, her finely coarse hair, falling gracefully into her eyes as she ran her fingers along the eggshell walls, and white chair rails. The house, cool and inaudible, had a comforting scent of fresh linen, running the perimeter of the interior.

Natalie Chandler approached the top of the loosely winding, open staircase of cherry hardwood, the railings trimmed in crisp white. She descended them slowly, the open foyer ahead of her, the vaulted ceilings above her, inviting in fresh northern sunlight, the walls around her, tastefully painted in a sage hue, the living room to the left, the dining room to the right. She headed around the back of the staircase, found an empty kitchen immediately, equipped with a breakfast bar of dark marble, stainless steel appliances with copper-flecked backsplashes, and a pretty bay window with a view of the wooded back lot, with a peek of the sparkling lake. And the hearth room, with brown leather couches, a small coffee table, ottomans and a big screen television as the focal point. It was there that she found the holding spot for all of the family photo albums, and the cherished family photos, trapped in gold framing, mounted on the wooden walls.

The largest one caught her attention first: a portrait of Jack and Mrs. Greene, and their four sons, baby Brandon in his mother's arms with surprising auburn hair, and the toddler Greene boys, each of which, Natalie could not place a face with his brothers' names, placed around his father's feet. The next, of two young boys, dressed in soccer uniforms, and the taller of the two Greene boys, looked strikingly similar to Brandon, with the exception of his eyes, which were brown, instead of Brandon's trademark blues. The third was surely Brandon, a pre-teen at best, with his father on a boat, holding a fishing rod. His Caesar-style haircut and obvious braces made dear Natalie snicker quietly, finding it hard then to imagine Brandon ever having an "awkward stage". Yet, the boy's face held promise, his smile just as warming to the soul then. This Brandon that stared back at her, who could have been no older than thirteen or fourteen felt like a stranger to her.

Natalie exhaled deeply, folded her arms tightly across her chest, and continued to look at his life, photo after photo, depicting a life before she ever existed, of birthday parties, of vacations, of bad haircuts, awful attire, braces and glasses, of soccer games and baseball tournaments, of the things that she never knew about, of a life that he failed to mention...

"We thought he'd never get out of that awkward stage..."

Jack Greene startled her, she gasped a little, and he extended his hand to her arm to settle her.

"Oh, I didn't mean to scare you, dear," he told her, chuckling.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie Chandler said shyly. “I didn’t know anyone else was in the house...”

Jack Greene scoffed with a wave of his hand. “Doesn’t bother me any...gets kind of lonely around here when Martha goes off to speak with her mother at the home...you’ll get to meet her tonight...”

She nodded. “Looking forward to it...”

“You needn’t be afraid, Natalie Chandler,” Jack Greene smiled. “I don’t bite...my wife on the other hand...”

“Exactly why I’ll keep on my toes...”

Jack Greene chuckled, looked toward the wall of frames and sighed. “They grow up so fast,” he said lowly. “Last time I checked, they were fighting about who got to eat the last cookie.”

They both laughed.

“Yes, it’s very quiet around here,” he told her. “It’s hard, not getting to see your kids everyday like you used to...”

Natalie only nodded.

“Do you have any siblings, Natalie?”

“Two. Sidney and Maya.”

“And where do you rank in age?”

“I’m the middle child,” she began. “Sidney’s the oldest and Maya’s the youngest...”

Jack Greene nodded then. “And when will we get to meet them?”

Natalie’s heart warmed. “Whenever you’d like...”

“The summer?”

“I’d like that...”

They looked at the pictures together.

“The boy’s crazy about you, I can tell...”

She felt her cheeks heat up. “I hope so...”

“Surely you find it as funny as his mother and I do...”

Natalie sighed. “Actually, I hadn’t really thought about it until I came here...I’ve never seen Brandon as anything different than my friend and the man that I love...”

“And I’m sure he feels the same way?”

“Of course...”

Jack Greene cleared his throat, and it reminded her of the times Brandon did the same, whenever he was uncomfortable.

“And how long have you known Brandon? Five years?”

“I think that’s right...”

“What a funny meeting...”

“I blame fate...”

“Right,” the father said. “A long time for young folks such as yourselves...”

“A very long time...”

“Ha,” Jack Greene said. “Try forty years, and see how you feel about him then...”

“I’m sure that I’ll love him as much as I did when I first fell for him,” Natalie told the father confidently. “And I’d say that a congratulations is in order...”

“I appreciate it,” he told her. “I’m sure that Brandon’s elated that you’ll get to meet his brothers...”

“That’s all he talks about these days,” she laughed. “That and the idea that we might be impoverished for the rest of our lives...”

“Oh?”

“He hasn’t found a job yet...”

Mr. Greene fell silent. A clearing of the throat followed.

A few moments later, the brown-skinned peach told the father, “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go lay down before dinner...”

He nodded in her direction, and she headed back toward the staircase.

When old Margaret Abbott, almost eighty-two, widowed at sixty-three, in her drunken, white-haired stupor, called Natalie a “colored” over baked cod and lima beans, everyone fell silent, and the young brown-eyed girl grabbed her fiancé’s thigh under the table, Brandon choking on his glass of pinot grigio, Natalie wiping her mouth with her napkin in shock.

Brandon Greene cleared his throat, lowered his glass, and patted his girl’s hand atop his thigh, and said, “Grandmother, we don’t say things like that anymore...”

Old Maggie, draped in something that looked like an decadently decorated floral bed sheet, picked up her glass of wine, took a long swig, wiped her mouth with her hand, and narrowed her eyes in Natalie’s direction.

“Didn’t the boy go to UGA?”

“Yes, Mother,” Martha Greene began. “That’s correct...”

Old Maggie nodded slowly, her eyes still on the poor young girl. Natalie swallowed hard.

“She’s a pretty little colored girl,” the old woman said.

“But the boy certainly had some white girls to look at...what ever happened to that little blond slut?”

“She’s gone,” Natalie said proudly.

“This is the one that Brandon has chosen, Maggie,” Jack Greene said, nodding in Natalie’s direction. “We must respect our son’s decision...he’s a grown man...”

“Decision, my ass,” the woman said. “What happened to the way things used to be? Didn’t there used to be some order around this goddamn place?”

“Mother,” Mrs. Greene began. “You shouldn’t curse like that...think of your blood pressure...”

“Oh, fuck my blood pressure, Martha...I said the girl was pretty, didn’t I?”

Natalie felt a little sick then.

“Precisely what I said,” the old woman continued. “A pretty little colored girl...what’s your name, girl?”

They each stood up, smiled in Brandon’s direction, and wasted no time in grabbing onto him like little boys, and they began wrestling, making their mother nervous, her, too soft-spoken and delicate to stop them. Mr. Greene stopped them, telling them that they each would have to do chores if they didn’t, and they all turned their attention to Natalie. She was amazed. They all stood in a line, and they all held similar features, stood tall at no less than six feet, Brandon the tallest, cer-

tainly, and each held the same masculine stature that Brandon and their father possessed.

Brandon left the line of brothers, came to her side, smiling, and said, “Guys, this is Natalie. Natalie, this is John [Brandon pointed to the one with dark hair like Brandon’s, with streaks of shimmering grey, a slimmer build and dark green eyes], Mark [he pointed to the one closest to John, the same one that Natalie had seen in the picture in the hearth room, who looked just like Brandon], and this is Matt [Brandon extended his long arms to the shortest Greene boy, with the lightest brown hair, and big brown eyes]...”

Natalie shook hands with each of the boys, each of them smiling, except for the eldest, John, who gave her a strangely cross look, who only gingerly touched her extended hand, who gave Brandon the same look thereafter.

She sat down on the veranda overlooking the lake with the Greene family at lunchtime, Mrs. Greene, having prepared cold sandwiches and a fruit salad, John and Mark’s childhood favorites. She observed their interaction, warm of course, but different from the way that she interacted with her family in Georgia. There was an obvious sense of reservation among the Greene boys, different from the rambunctious men that Natalie first met. Brandon, shockingly quiet, poked at his fruit with his fork. She placed her fork down onto her plate, rubbed his back slowly, as they listened to a story from the cordial Jack Greene.

The story was about Old Maggie, of course, a name given to the old woman by the retirement community, which she’d lived in for almost ten years, following her third husband’s death. Natalie noticed the way Mrs. Greene’s face looked, as Jack Greene recalled a time in the boys’ childhood that their crazed grandmother did this or their batty grandmother said that. Mrs. Greene, who’d barely touched her fruit, looked at her husband as if she wanted to keep him from talking about her mother that way, but the Greene boys seemed to enjoy it so much, each of them not being able to recall these occurrences so long ago.

“That sounds like Grandmother to me,” Matthew Greene said, throwing his napkin in his plate.

The breeze picked up then, carried Natalie’s waved bob into her face, and Jack Greene, said, “The wind is cooperating today...”

Each of the boys nodded. “Do you still have our fishing rods around here?” Mark Greene asked.

Jack Greene’s faced curled in thought. “I think so...they might be in the boathouse...”

“I think it’s a good day to go fishing,” Mark Greene suggested.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Matt Greene said.

“I’ll be captain this time,” Brandon said, smiling.

“Yeah...right,” Mark Greene said. “Surely, you remember the last time we let you steer, you twit...”

“Mark, don’t call your brother a ‘twit’,” Mrs. Greene told his son.

“Bottom line is, you’re not driving the boat,” Matt Greene told his younger brother.

“Yes, I am...”

“Father can decide...”

Jack Greene smiled. “Natalie will drive the boat...”

Natalie sat up, looked at Brandon. “No,” she smiled nervously. “I don’t think so...”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Brandon said. “And I’ll help her...”

“Brandon...no...”

He pinched the back of her neck, gently. “Don’t worry, baby,” he told her. “It’s a cinch, trust me...”

“Don’t listen to him,” Matt Greene said. “If it were a ‘cinch’, how would he have managed to capsize the boat?”

Jack Greene owned a 19-foot white pontoon with beige and navy trimmings, named Martha. It had been given to him as a birthday gift about seven years ago, by Mrs. Greene herself, when all of his boys were still living home. It was housed in a small, wooden boathouse, just off the pier. He kept it there in the off-season, when the lake froze. He ordered for his boys to retrieve the bass buggy, while Natalie watched, and they steered the boat to the side of the pier so Natalie could climb on, Brandon, reaching for her hands to help her down.

Matthew Greene then plopped a quirky, worn bucket hat atop her head, laughing at her, saying, “Now, you’re really part of the experience.”

She adjusted the hat so that it fit snugly atop her head, and watched as the Greene brothers, retrieved their own fishing rods.

Jack Greene took Natalie’s hand, pulled her up, and moved her towards the steering wheel at the bow of the boat. Natalie shook her head in rebuttal.

“I think one of you guys should drive it,” she told them.

Jack Greene shook his head too. “Nonsense, Natalie Chandler, it’s a cinch...”

She’d heard that before, surely...

She looked in Brandon’s direction for help, and he started to move in her direction, as if wanting to, but his father stopped him, saying, “Now, now...she can do this by herself...”

No, she couldn’t. She needed Brandon. Yes, she could pretend like she was steering and then he would actually be doing all of the work.

But Jack Greene placed her hands on the silver wheel anyway, instructed her on how easy it was to start up the engine, got a little nervous when she felt the boat sway to the right a little.

“Don’t worry about that, Natalie,” Jack Greene coached. “It’s only normal...that’s it, you’re doing great...see, you didn’t need Brandon after all, did you?”

Maybe she did, maybe she didn't. But she loved the way the breeze blew off of the water and hit her face, loved the way it smelled, loved the way the midday sun fell down on her, couldn't believe that she was actually driving a boat! Ha, she was actually captain of a boat! Mama would flip if she found out. Those white people have finally done you in, haven't they, Nattie?

Yes, Mama, yes. She was becoming one of them, and what a strange feeling it was, wasn't it? She looked back at Brandon and he seemed pleased, smiled slightly, and winked at her. Yes, she was doing this all for him, wasn't she? For the way his dark hair blew carelessly in the breeze, for the way he slouched carelessly against the side of the boat, for the way he stood up to his parents for her, for that sweet, sweet, lake air, reminding her of that amazing weekend at Hartwell that seemed like ages ago. She was only twenty then, and she and her Brandon were still so new, the feeling inside of her when he was around was fresh.

Ha...

She liked Jack Greene. He was carefree, possessed an easy smile, and had no reservations about touching her, about guiding her, about making her feel instantly welcome, had the same charm that made her go wild with Brandon, was inadvertently warm, lacking the coldness that his wife seemed to cling to for dear life. In short, Jack Greene seemed completely unaffected by the northern snobbishness that could potentially swallow him whole, a man of experience, warmth...

"Good girl," Jack Greene told her, smiling patting her back. "You did much better than these guys right here..."

Natalie, feeling proud, returned to Brandon, who still sat while his brothers reached for their poles, and she sat next to him, allowing him to put his arm around her.

"Good job," he whispered into her ear, kissing the side of her face.

"Thank you," she replied into his face, kissing his lips lightly.

"Oh, please," Matt Greene said, covering his eyes playfully. "Will you two cut that out?"

"He's just jealous, that's all," Brandon whispered into her ear. She smiled, recalling what he said about Matt never wanting to get married.

"I think he might be..."

Brandon let her hold his fishing rod, and he stood behind her, showing her how to hook the bait, showing her how to cast it just right, watching the line go far, far into the lake, making a distant plopping noise. She was reminded of the picture in the hearth room with Brandon and his father, standing on the boat.

They held the rod together, and each time she felt a little tug, she squealed and said, "Brandon, is it time?"

And he'd only laugh, shake his head and say, "No, Tal, no...be patient...I'll let you know when..."

“How’s it going over there?” Jack Greene asked, casting another line into the iron-colored water.

“Great,” Brandon said, pushing his body into her further. “She’s a natural...”

“Good to hear,” Jack Greene said. “Because if Natalie’s going to be a part of this family, she’s got to know how to fish...”

By dinnertime that second evening, she was able to distinguish whom each Greene brother was, what made them special and what they were doing with their lives. The oldest was John Abbott Greene, who had just turned thirty-one in the spring of that year, who’d gotten married two years prior, to a real estate broker from Albany, named Chloe, who was seven months pregnant. Deep-voiced and painfully reserved, Johnny, as Martha called him, appeared as if he was in on a scandalous secret that he would never tell.

Mark Mitchell Greene was twenty-nine, ruggedly handsome, with sincere green eyes, a wide smile, a playful personality, a wife of five years, Joanna, and a three-year-old daughter named Julie, who lived with him in a brownstone in Brooklyn, where he and his cheeky redheaded wife owned a dessert shop. Mark never seemed to take life too seriously, which Natalie could tell unnerved Martha Greene...

Matthew Barrett Greene was only one year older than Brandon, was pleasantly unemployed, and still enjoyed getting money from his parents, who seemed to have no trouble spoiling him. He drove a flashy blue BMW that his father bought

him, wore croakies and donned bright colors and popped collars, and put more gel in his sandy hair than what seemed necessary. Brandon told her once that he was first in line to take over his father’s business, but didn’t want it. Brandon told her that Matt got a kick out of being a “freeloader”, but still bragged to girls that he was involved with, that every materialistic thing he possessed was because of his own doing...

Brandon was closest to Mark and told him everything growing up. He admitted that his older brother was how he learned about sex and girls. He once said that he always wanted to be like him when they were younger, always doing the things that he did, always wanting to go on his dates, always wanting to go play soccer with him and his friends.

“He was just so cool,” Brandon admitted bashfully.

He admitted that Mark was the only one that knew about him dating her, and was the first to know about their engagement.

“Let’s just say he knows a lot about you...”

And Mark was the only one that didn’t like Sophia.

“He couldn’t stand her,” Brandon admitted. “I guess that should have been my first clue that something wasn’t right...”

Natalie didn’t ask about John until they sat in Brandon’s old bedroom, only a few paces away from the guest room, amidst a quiet domicile of sleeping Greenes and a floating fall breeze, in a bedroom which still had a couple of Michael Jordan and Ken Griffey, Jr. posters hanging on the wall, and a

boxful of baseball trading cards in a corner. They sat on the twin-sized bed, with the baseball-printed sheets and a ratty blue comforter together.

“He got into a really bad accident when he was younger,” Brandon explained quietly, his expression, seeming to relive each moment of it. “He was in the hospital for a week, and he didn’t talk for days after that...he was on crutches for awhile. He doesn’t like to talk about it. He hasn’t always been...that way...”

“You mean, all sullen and depressed?”

“Yea, you noticed, huh?”

Natalie nodded.

“Yea, poor guy,” Brandon began with a sigh. “If it wasn’t for meeting Chloe a few years ago, he probably would’ve been one of those guys who moves back into their childhood home at forty and lets their mom take care of them...”

“Thank God for her, then,” Natalie said, moving into him, letting him cover her with his arms.

Brandon sighed again. “Yea, she’s great...you’ll meet her at the party tomorrow...she and Joanna and Julie are flying in tomorrow morning...”

Natalie chuckled. “Bran, you’re an uncle...”

“Yea, I know...I feel old...but Jules is the most behaved child I’ve ever come across, considering who her father is...”

“Aw, what does she look like?”

“She looks like Mark,” Brandon said matter-of-factly. “But with dark hair...”

“Like yours?”

“Precisely...she’s beautiful...Julie Ann Greene...but it’s strange because neither of her parents have dark hair...”

“Pretty...”

“Well, Greene just makes any ordinary name sound pretty...”

“Oh yea?”

“Yea, watch...Natalie Chandler Greene...sounds pretty, doesn’t it?”

“Sounds nice...but what if I don’t want to take your last name? I think I love my middle name too much.”

“You’re taking my last name, Tallie,” Brandon demanded, tickling her sides a little. “You can be... Natalie Savannah Chandler-Greene...”

“Nah, that’s too long...I’ll just go with the first one, I suppose...”

“Tal, just as long as you’re a Greene, I don’t care what comes before it...”

Natalie looked at the baseball-themed wall clock just above the bed and sighed. “It’s getting late,” she told him, feeling him squeeze her just a little tighter.

Brandon followed her gaze and said, “Yea, I suppose so... I’m sure Mom will have us running around the house tomorrow like banshees before the party...”

“So, that means, I won’t see you at all?”

Brandon shook his head. “It looks that way...unless you want to help with some things...”

“No, I want to stay as far out of your mother’s way as possible,” Natalie said. “Did you see the way she looked at me at dinner?”

“Nope, didn’t notice,” Brandon said. “I swear your paranoia gets worse and worse everyday...she acted the same way when Mark and John brought Joanna and Chloe home for the first time...it’ll blow over...”

“You really think so?”

“Tallie, would I tell you if I was lying?” he told her, kissing the side of her face. “You should go to bed...you need rest...”

“Join me?”

Brandon exhaled deeply, seemed to ponder the idea seriously and whispered against her cheek, “No, baby...I shouldn’t...but you don’t hesitate to come get me if you need anything, okay?”

She nodded compliantly and slid off the bed slowly, taking his hand with her, saying, “Well, at least walk me...”

“Sure,” he chuckled. “I can walk you two feet...”

“Precisely as it should be,” she replied.

And as they stood before the guest bedroom door, she tried to persuade him once more, their fingers tangled in a lingered fashion, Natalie grinning up to him.

“Are you sure? I won’t get mad if you snore...”

Brandon exhaled in the same way he’d done before, paused and shook his head and replied, “Baby...”

“Brandon, it’s cold...you know I don’t sleep well when it’s cold...”

“There’re some extra blankets in the closet by the door...”

“You’re really trying to make this hard, aren’t you? What if your mother comes in here while I’m sleeping and suffocates me with a pillow?”

“Okay, take your delirious ass to bed,” Brandon said, proceeding to shove her in the room, while she tugged on him in an attempt to stop him.

“Brandon,” she breathed.

Yes, her hands were gripping his sides, pulling at his shirt, and her fragile body was pressed against his.

Brandon Greene pressed his forehead against hers slowly and said, “Please don’t say my name that way...”

She looked up at him, rolled her lips in and whispered, “I guess I shouldn’t, should I?”

“Absolutely not,” he told her, pulling her into him. “You don’t understand how hard it is for me to say no to you right now...”

“You don’t have to,” she reminded him, rubbing his waist just right.

“Natalie, you just don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” Brandon warned. “And in my parents’ home? Let’s call it a night...”

Natalie sighed. “Fine...I’m sure it’s a catholic thing...”

Brandon nodded and they pressed their lips together once, lingeringly, and when they reopened their eyes, Brandon said, “We should wait, don’t you think we should wait?”

“We should wait,” she agreed. “Not in your parents house...”

“Right,” he said. “Not here...”

“Till the wedding...we should wait till the wedding...”

“I completely agree...till the wedding...I mean, you’ve waited this long...”

“Exactly...just disregard what just happened...”

“Forgotten...”

Natalie took a step inside her dark bedroom, clutching onto the door. She felt as if her knees would give in at any moment.

And she looked at him.

“Goodnight, Brandon,” she breathed.

Brandon took a slow step back himself, sighed and said, “Goodnight, baby...I’ll see you soon...”

And he disappeared behind his bedroom door.

As soon as she laid her body down to sleep, she knew that she’d have a rough night ahead of her. And she sure wasn’t looking forward to the anniversary dinner the following night, with all the attendees, representing all that she feared of the Caucasian race. And would Martha Greene introduce her to the Greene’s friends? Would she claim her? Would she tell them that she was about to be a part of her family? A Greene? It was almost hard for Natalie to swallow herself, still finding it hard to imagine attaching a new last name to hers...Brandon’s last name.

She longed for Brandon's body to be lying next to hers. But she’ll witness the moonlight through the window, hold the white blanket close to her body and hope that it comforts her soon. She’ll dream of him and their life together and remind herself that she was here for him...always him.

She swung her feet to the floor quietly, a couple of hours before dawn broke, body cast in shadow, her white gown grazing her calves. She walked in the direction of the bathroom, flicked on the light, and after she’d splashed water on her face, she looked in the mirror, examined the dark circles under her eyes, and thought about waking Brandon up so that they could talk. Instead, she opted to be alone, figured that there was no reason to bother him this late, and figured it could wait till daylight broke.

Natalie left the guest bedroom, cracking the door behind her, and tiptoed down the darkened hallway, a low whisper of the breeze rolling through. She descended the staircase and arrived in the kitchen and she allowed guilt to run through her, remembering the times her mama scolded her for roaming through people’s houses unattended. Still, Lord willing, she was about to become a part of the Greene family.

She opened the refrigerator, hoping that she didn’t make too much noise, hoping that there would be something good to eat, hoping that she could take her mind off of Brandon for more than two seconds...

She began fishing, flinched every time that a couple of jars clinked together, slowly became more frustrated when she didn't see anything that she wanted.

"How comfortable you've become..."

Natalie turned around, caught focus of Martha Greene sitting at the breakfast bar...it appeared that she'd been sitting there for awhile, watching her son's fiancée, completely undetected...

Natalie swallowed hard, retreated from her refrigerator-rummaging mission, and turned to the old woman.

With her countenance stoic and her body in stiff position, Martha Greene patted the barstool next to her, her pale face cast in the moonlight...

Natalie crept toward the barstool, slid in next to the woman, and her look was one of caution, hesitancy, her eyes a victim of the weird way that her heart beat.

The woman cleared her throat, began to tap her fingers slowly...

"I love my son," she began in the softest voice she'd ever heard. "I love all of my boys...they're my life, my heart... and...I take quite an interest in how they conduct their lives... especially when it comes to who they get involved with...do you understand that, Natalie?"

Natalie nodded slowly.

"My Brandon, he's a smart one...he's so strong, so aggressive, confident, assertive...and sometimes...all of these admirable qualities can turn on him...and...and they can turn into

things that keep him from thinking correctly, thinking rationally, thinking things out thoroughly...do you understand that, child?"

Natalie sighed heavily, looked at the woman, whose eyes were Brandon's, through and in between, and shook her head, "No, I don't think so..."

"I am almost certain that...that he loves you..."

"Yes, I'm certain of that too..."

Natalie could feel herself getting agitated, could feel the room, despite the loftiness of the vaulted ceilings, cave in on her slowly...she only hoped that the woman, whose presence Brandon held dear, would not say anything unorthodox.

"I'm also certain that somewhere in the back of his mind he thinks that marrying you is the right thing to do, but..."

"But...?"

Martha Greene's face twisted in a way that indicated that the words she was about to deliver were not going to be the most pleasant ones.

Natalie, preparing for the worst, took another deep breath.

"But...he hasn't established himself in the marketing world, he's still so young, and moving to...wherever...for your sake is completely..."

"Completely...?"

Martha Greene cleared her throat again. "Have you... have you ever taken notice of the fact that you and Brandon...are...different? Have you ever thought about the day that your differences will prove to be too much? He cannot sup-

port you, Natalie Chandler, on thirty thousand a year...he just can't. He'll need his father and myself for a least a couple of years...and we've agreed to give him the money under one condition..."

Natalie examined the woman's face, saw her coldness, felt her throat close, and when she parted her lips to speak, she initially found it difficult, even when she saw no change in the woman's expression...

"He didn't," she breathed.

Martha Greene tapped her pale fingers against the marble bar, sighed heavily, and she whispered, "We haven't told him, but we can...you can leave this house quietly, leave him a little note and that will be the end of it..."

Natalie fought the tears.

"We think its best," Martha Greene began. "Think about it this way...you both will have secure futures...you both will not have to worry about supporting each other...I mean, how satisfying is the idea of poverty? If you love him, then this is your chance to show him...this is your chance to let him have a secure future, a happy future..."

Natalie slid off of the barstool, walked towards the door of the kitchen, and turned back to the old woman.

"I'm not leaving him," she said with a weakened voice. "You can threaten me with every thing you can throw at me...but I don't care...I don't care! I'm not leaving him! You're right, I could be anything that I want to be without him...but with all those possibilities, I'd be nothing if he wasn't there..."

I'm nothing..With God as my witness, I'm marrying that man...and you or your husband or any other white person in this godforsaken town can't do a damn thing to stop me..."

She caught up with Brandon the following morning as he helped his brothers load up his father's black Yukon SUV with place settings, name cards and such for the party that evening. She pulled him aside, didn't say anything initially, only folded her arms, leaving him with a baffled look upon his face.

"What's with you?" he asked her.

"Your mother," Natalie said.

"Oh, Natalie, not again," Brandon whined, proceeding to walk away. "I don't want to hear that right now..."

Natalie reached for his arm, pulling him back before her. "No, listen," she commanded.

"What? What could you possibly have to say about her now?"

"She threatened me..."

"Care to elaborate?"

Natalie pulled him in closer, as if to tell a secret, whispering, "She told me that her and your father were going to give you money if you left me..."

Brandon pulled away from her swiftly. "Natalie, that's fucking absurd, and I can't believe that you would say something like that about them..."

She looked at him. "You think I'm making this up?"

“I’m thinking that you didn’t get enough sleep last night,” Brandon said, beginning to walk away. “My parents don’t have time to conjure up such things...”

“Oh, they’d make time for it,” Natalie said after him, watching him stop cold.

He paused for a moment and started walking back toward her. “Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” he asked her speculatively. “Shouldn’t they be paying you not to marry me?”

Natalie fell silent. Yes, that scenario did make more sense. But, that wasn’t how it happened, that wasn’t the way his mother put it...

“Brandon...why would I lie to you about this?”

“That’s a very good question, Natalie,” he sighed. “And maybe you should think about that...”

Natalie folded her arms. And they only stared at each other for a few moments.

“Oh, please, Natalie,” he said, rolling his eyes, sensing her emotion. “I don’t have time for this right now...you’re acting like a baby...why don’t we talk about it later once you’ve had your coffee?”

“Don’t patronize me, Brandon,” she said forcefully through her teeth, moving close to her face. “I know what I heard...”

“Well, that’s between you and your god, Natalie,” he told her. “Because my mother hasn’t said a bad thing about you since we’ve been here...you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous?” she asked him. “How dare you...?”

“Yea, well...”

“I won’t go, Brandon, I won’t do it...”

“You won’t go where?”

“To your parents’ party...”

“You’d really do that?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes...”

Brandon began to back away, throwing his hands up. “By all means, Natalie...while you’re at it, why don’t we just call this whole thing off? I’m sure, deep down, that’s what this is all about...”

“If you think so, Brandon, then maybe I will,” she said, feeling her throat tighten. “If you can walk away, so can I...”

“Be my guest,” he said. “No one’s stopping you...I, most certainly, am not...”

She headed back up the long driveway, not realizing what had just happened until she got back to the guest room, reached for the bag she’d brought and started to pack her things. There was no such order in the way that she tossed her things inside the bag, throwing them from the left and from the right, her insides heated, her breath caught, her eyes threatening tears.

It couldn’t possibly be over that quickly, right? No...they had way too long of a history for that. So, why was she packing? And why hasn’t Brandon run after her? Isn’t that his job?

She'll continue to pack out of protest. She's almost certain that he's coming up the stairs, and he'll be running, and he'll be out of breath, and she'll jump into his arms and apologize for being a fool.

He wasn't serious when he suggested that they should call it off. After all, she'd resisted the urge to throw the one and a half carat diamond ring back in his face out of spite. That would have really sealed it, right? That would have certainly sent him over the edge.

If she knew him at all, he'd come to his senses, run to her side and kiss her face all over. Yes, she'll pack slowly. Any minute, her baby would come pushing in the door...

Any minute now...

It's just a fight...like they always have...no problem...

Heck, even if she insulted his parents and their hospitality, her Brandon will come around...he has too, right?

Any minute...

Only a few seconds away...

Any second...

Where is he? Has it been thirty minutes already?

She'll leave! She'll show him!

Natalie Chandler gathered her things, left the guest bed unmade, headed down the main staircase and out of the door. Lugging her suitcase behind her, she trucked up the driveway, seeing neither Brandon, his father's truck, nor the rest of the family anywhere in sight. This would be her clean break,

wouldn't it? Could she call a cab? No, she didn't have the money. She would walk. Heck, she was a big girl. She would walk all the way to Albany if she had to.

Well, she probably wouldn't do that. But she could at least walk until she got to a point of civilization. And then she'd call Maya or maybe Asha. They'd know what to do. They'd suggest her next step. They'd probably come get her if she cried hard enough. But, she most certainly wouldn't call her mother, would she? Mama would only shake her head, say something mean about him and scold her for taking it this far with him. And then she'd suggest something completely crazy like getting back with Anthony. She would never do that. But things were easier, weren't they? And his mother had loved her, didn't she? Had loved her Cajun baked chicken with fried green beans and her sweet tea and her banana pudding, with the home-made vanilla wafers. Ms. Jones had loved playing gin rummy with her the most, even more than her own children! Ms. Jones had loved her pretty coarse hair, long and baby-fine, and the sundresses she always wore. Ms. Jones had loved that she was a God-fearing girl, with her head screwed on right. Ms. Jones loved her laugh, giggly and breathy.

She wouldn't even check her phone to see if Brandon had called. And even if he did, she wouldn't answer. She would only walk till she grew tired, till she reached town, till she could call her little sister and pour her heart out. She would save her tears till then...

She stopped for a moment and started to pull the ring from her finger. She would be rid of it once and for all! But her phone vibrated in her pocket and her stomach flipped. If it was him she wouldn't answer, and then he'd call back and then she wouldn't answer and then he'd call back again, and then she'd know that he was really sorry and she'd answer then, and she'd probably start crying...

She reached for her phone.

Asha calling...

"Asha," she'd answered.

"How'd his parents take the news? Did they just fall over and die?"

"I guess you could say that..."

"Really? What happened? Wait...what's the matter with you?"

"I'm on the side of the road..."

"Natalie, what the hell are you talking about?"

Natalie huffed. "I have my suitcase, and I'm on the side of the road..."

"Wow, was it really that bad?"

Natalie felt her heart tighten. "Sure...if a certain person's mother tells you that they're going to pay their broke son to get rid of their black fiancée...then I'm sure that things aren't looking up..."

"Natalie...are you serious? What did Bran say?"

"He doesn't know," she told her friend. "And when I tried to tell him this morning, he thought I was making it up to try and get out of marrying him..."

"Why on earth would he think a thing like that?"

"Who knows," Natalie said. "But he flipped out and suggested that we call off this whole thing and I agreed and now I'm leaving Saratoga any way that I can..."

"You can't walk all the way to—where are you going?"

"I don't know," Natalie said, her voice cracking, defeated. "I'm a nomad...a single nomad..."

"Don't be hasty, Nat," Asha said. "Why don't you just breathe for a moment and think this out...we'll think it out together...now, there's no mistaking that his parents are assholes..."

"Just his mother," she said. "Just her..."

"Well...whatever," Asha said. "You're still on the side of the road...and where is Brandon?"

"Somewhere with his father and his brothers..."

"So, Brandon's being an asshole too...hmm...tough situation..."

"Tell me about it...I told him that I wasn't going to his parents stupid anniversary party..."

"With good reason! Good for you...but what to do with you?"

He felt like he was twenty-four again, and he's staring at Natalie across the table, drunk, can barely keep her head up,

laughing at him, mocking him, him, knowing that walking away from her will be the best thing, until she understands that he really and truly loves her, always had.

Natalie is laughing at him now, and he feels that she wants out of this engagement. How dare she make up a story like that? How dare she? He is almost certain that they'll talk it out when he gets back from setting up things for his parent's party at the Inn. He hadn't meant what he said. He was simply so angry that he felt like he had to spite her to get her attention. He was done with her insecurities, with her uncertainties, but wasn't done with her, and hoped to never be. He simply couldn't chase her any longer. He was tired. He was tired of worrying how she felt about him, worrying about what she was thinking, worrying about the one day where she'd turn on him and say that she was going back to Anthony as she'd done before, leaving him completely crushed and empty.

He would assume, as he placed chairs beneath crimson-clothed tables that this was a routine fight between them, that Natalie was resting, waiting on his return, waiting on him to pull her into his arms, kiss her all over and say that he'd been crazy.

As he rode with his father and brothers back to the house, three hours later, he grew anxious, hoped that she was no longer angry, that they could talk this out rationally, hoped that the story she'd told wasn't true at all.

He ran into the house, up the main staircase, down the chilly, shadowed corridor, into the guest bedroom, calling, "Tal-

lie, I'm sorr—" and she wasn't there, the bed wasn't made, and her bag was missing.

Strange...

So, he tried the kitchen, then the hearth room, then the dining room, outside on the dock, in the boathouse, calling her name, calling her, calling her, his heart racing....

And he reached into his pocket, retrieved his phone and called her.

Busy signal...

He tried her again. Straight to voicemail the second time around.

"Natalie, it's me," he said into the phone, out of breath. "I don't know where you are right now, but it would be great if you'd call me back so I won't have this panicky feeling right now...thanks..."

He got sidetracked when he entered the house and saw that Joanna and Chloe and little Julie had arrived. He hugged and kissed both the wives, gathered Julie in his arms, swung her around gently and kissed her cheek gingerly, hearing her giggle. He lowered the child to the ground, but she raised her arms up, wanting to be picked up again, and he picked her up again, bouncing her in his arms, little Julie, clapping her hands and giggling.

"She's missed you," Jo said, placing a hand on her back.

"Oh, yea?" Brandon said. "Well, I've missed her too..."

And he kissed her cheek again.

“Where’s this girl you’ve been hiding for so long, Brandon?” Chloe asked.

“Yes,” Jo began. “Martha says she’s something to look at...”

“You know what?” Brandon began. “That’s a very good question...excuse me...”

And he took off out the front door.

He had to think calmly, rationally, had to think like her. He assumed that she couldn’t have gotten far, considering the fact that she walked slow everywhere else, had zero concept of time, and didn’t want to call a cab because she didn’t have the money. He would search on foot, hoping that she was just around the corner, perhaps by the lake, sorting out her feelings and her thoughts, if he knew anything about her...anything...

After all, Tallie did some things that he didn’t understand sometimes, but she was never too far away from rational thought, never too far out of the realm to think that he wouldn’t come running after her, as hard as he tried not to. But that didn’t stop his worry, didn’t stop his fear...

Brandon walked a fast pace down the road that he and his brothers spent many years on, beneath afternoon sunlight and a chilly autumn breeze. Yes, Natalie wouldn’t last long in this northern air. He pictured her rubbing her tiny arms, teeth chattering, wishing that she’d packed that jacket like he’d suggested.

Not everywhere’s like humid Georgia, my sweet Tallie...

He reached for his cell phone and tried her number again. Three long rings and no answer.

“Natalie, please, stop doing this,” he pleaded, ascending a hill. “You’re acting like a child...answer the phone, damn it...”

Okay, okay, that probably wasn’t the best way to get through to her, but he was growing angrier and angrier by each passing second, and he most certainly didn’t have the time to be running after her like this.

But he would. Damn it, he always would, wouldn’t he? It wasn’t over...

He grabbed his cell phone again.

The fairer, southern voice answered on the other end as if they were surprised.

“Where is she?” There was strength in his voice, ardency, a tone that suggested that he would no longer put up with the bullshit that both of them fed him. They were no longer in college.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

“Asha, you must think I’m the dumbest person that ever walked this planet,” he told her. “Tell me where she is now...”

“Um, she doesn’t want me to tell you...”

“God, I must have fallen and bumped my head...because I swear we’re in elementary school all over again...”

“Must be,” Asha agreed. “Because only someone that age would say the things that you did to her and think that it’s

okay...you know, suggesting that you call the whole thing off..."

"It was a fight, Ash," he suggested, plopping down on his bottom there on the side of the road. "Things like that happen all the time..."

"Come on, Brandon," Asha said. "Is it ever really just a 'fight' with Natalie?"

Brandon sighed, huffed, "Oh, my God," with aggravation and clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Well, you should have believed her when she was trying to tell you that your mother's a bitch..."

"Asha, you're out of line..."

"Am I? Or is she? Maybe, for once, you could try and see where Nat's coming from, how she might be feeling, realize that she's never lied to you before, and that if she didn't want to be there she most certainly wouldn't be there..."

Brandon sighed, lowered his head with defeat and murmured, "Where is she?"

"She's headed downtown...I might have told her to catch the bus..."

"Asha, please remind me to strangle you next time that I see you..."

"Goodbye, and good luck..."

He headed back to Hartford Retreat, asked his father if he could borrow his truck and soared in the direction of down-

town, with one hand on the wheel and the other dialing Natalie's number again.

Four rings, no answer...

"Natalie, pick up, please," he said. "I'm headed downtown...we have to talk about this...it's not...it's not over..."

He veered onto Cornwallis several minutes following, parked illegally in front of the bus station, and raced inside the chilly interior. He searched, and he searched and he searched, didn't he?

He asked the clerks behind the ticketing booth if they'd seen a tall, skinny black girl stalking around. None of them had seen anyone that fit that description.

He slumped into a vinyl seat by the entrance, attempted to catch his breath, and didn't know what to do.

Was she really gone?

No, no...she wouldn't leave him that way, she wouldn't have left them like that.

But didn't he once upon a time? Didn't he walk away from her and pretend as if she didn't matter?

Maybe he deserved it. How dare he talk to her like that? Why couldn't he have just believed her? Wouldn't that have made things so much easier?

He returned to the house. Joanna and Chloe had gone shopping, Mark, John and Matt were with Dad at the Inn, Julie was down for a nap, and Mom was on the veranda, with

her feet tucked under her, reading a book and sipping from a teacup.

It took her a few moments to acknowledge his presence, looming over her.

“Darling,” she said peaceably. “Why don’t you come sit with your mother for awhile?”

She patted the space next to her, and he sat down compliantly.

She put her book down, and invited his head into her lap. He complied, and allowed his mother to stroke his head gently, the way she used to when she knew that something was bothering him.

“Where’s that little girl of yours?” she asked quietly. “Where did she run off to?”

“Mom...”

“Yes, darling?”

He took a deep breath. He would ask his mother calmly and rationally and pray through and through that it wasn’t true, pray that it was all in his fiancée’s head.

“Did you say something to Natalie that might make her think that you didn’t want her around?”

His mother didn’t answer initially. She only reached for her teacup again, took a sip, and replaced it on the teakwood coffee table before her.

“Mom...” he pressed.

“Hmm?”

“Did you say something?”

“Brandon...your father and I have been talking a little bit and...we...we think that...”

Brandon sat up, looked at her mother whose eyes matched his own, and said, “You did say something didn’t you?”

“We want you to have a secure future,” she told him. “She’s a darling girl, she really is...I can see why you’d want to be with her...but...do you think that marriage is...is...best?”

Brandon bit his lip back before he said anything that he’d regret. He didn’t want to yell at his mother, didn’t want to say something that he didn’t mean. But damn it, at that moment, she was making it very hard.

“Yes, Mom, marriage is what I want,” he said quietly. “Mom...how could you?”

“Son, I...”

Brandon got up from his seat. “No, no...you crossed the line and you know it...”

“Brandon, we just think...”

“We...or *you*?”

“Don’t talk to me that way,” she said. “You are still my son...”

“I’m starting to wonder if we’re even related at all...”

“Brandon David Greene!”

“I don’t know where she is! Are you happy about that? Are you happy that you got your way? What has she done to you? Seriously? The girl wouldn’t hurt a fly...”

“I just want you to be happy, darling...”

“Mom, the happiness that I feel rests with her,” Brandon explained, feeling his voice break. “It rests with her...”

His mother reached out for him. He pulled away and watched her expression sour. “Son, please, listen to reason...”

“I have to go...”

And Brandon walked away.

Night was beginning to fall, and so was the temperature.

As she headed back in the direction of Hartford Retreat, she marked this moment and the entire day as the dumbest thing she’d ever done. Did she really think that she’d get on a bus and go somewhere? Did she really think that she’d be able to leave him? Of course not...she’d stick by her words.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and she just had to make it back to the house before the party started, and before she got soaking wet.

She started to run. She had to make it.

But the downpour came anyway, and she was still a few miles from the house, and it soaked her, and she started to cry. Yes, she cried for the stupid way she’d acted that day, for his mother not liking her, for the things he’d said to her, for ignoring his phone calls.

And she ran harder.

She didn’t want out. She never wanted out. She would stop these games one day.

She would convince him that she loved him...always had, always would...

She reached the Greene palace, soaking wet, knocked on the door with passion, and received no answer, and the rain fell down her face relentlessly. And the rain and her tears became one beneath a falling sky.

She was so stupid. So, so stupid.

She wouldn’t act this way anymore. She wouldn’t let her paranoia get the best of her anymore.

If God would only give her that chance...if it wasn’t too late.

She would wait till the Greens came back.

Then she would tell Brandon that she was sorry...so, so sorry...

“You must be Brandon’s fiancée...”

Natalie, who’d been clawing at the Greene’s front door dizzily for the past twenty minutes or so, turned around and spotted an attractive redheaded woman with deep green eyes, long thick hair, and brown freckles kissing her pale cheeks. She was narrow with long arms and had a sense of graceful ease about her.

Natalie nodded. “Yes, yes, I am...”

“Ah,” the woman said, in an unmistakably northern accent. “So, you’re the one who had Brandon running around all afternoon...”

“I think so...”

The woman came to her, extended her hand as if to help her up, and Natalie complied, coming to her feet in run swift movement, shivering.

“You don’t look too good,” the woman said. “Let’s get you inside, shall we?”

Natalie nodded.

The woman escorted Natalie up the staircase, and into another bedroom across from the one she stayed in. The woman walked her into the bathroom, flicking on the light, inviting Natalie to stand in front of the mirror.

“What’s your name, honey?” the woman asked gently, tugging at Natalie’s clinging sleeve.

“Natalie,” she told the woman through clenched teeth.

“Natalie, that’s pretty,” she said. “I’m Mark’s wife...Joanna...Joanna Greene...”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Natalie admitted, allowing the woman to pull her shirt over her head.

“Oh, really? I hope it’s all good stuff...”

Natalie nodded. “Yes, Brandon thinks very highly of you...”

“Well, that’s always good to hear,” Joanna Greene said. “Here I am looking for my purse that I left here and look what I come up with...you had Brandon searching for you up until the time that the party started...we had to force him to leave...we assumed you’d turn up eventually...and you did...”

Joanna Greene tossed Natalie’s wet clothes off in a corner to the side, and she stood in nothing more than the bra and panties that she’d dressed in that morning.

“We’ll stick these wet clothes in the dryer on the way out,” Joanna suggested.

“I can’t go anywhere,” Natalie said timidly. “I don’t have a dress...”

Joanna Greene reached for a tissue from the box on the marble countertop and started to wipe Natalie’s face clean. Natalie watched the woman purse her lips in thought.

“Hmm, hold that thought,” the woman said, dropping the tissue and walking back into bedroom. Moments later, the woman returned a black, floor-length, open-backed number, with tasteful sequins, three-quarter length sleeves, and a plunging V-neck.

“We look around the same size,” Joanna Greene said. “I think that it would look great on you...”

Natalie held up her hands in protest. “Joanna, I can’t accept this...”

“Natalie, please, I would be offended if you didn’t accept the dress...it would look magnificent on you...and I’m sure that Brandon would love to see you in it...I have no problems letting you be a princess for the night...”

“Joanna, I...”

“Jo, call me Jo...”

“Jo, I can’t accept this, it’s too much...what if I mess it up?”

Joanna Greene shrugged. “Take it to dry cleaning in the morning...no problem...”

Natalie couldn’t understand why the woman was being so friendly or what made her give so easily. But she sighed. It was

a pretty dress, and she did need to get to that party before it was too late. After all, she was already an hour late.

“Natalie,” Joanna Greene sang, dancing the dress in front of her. “I have matching shoes...”

Natalie accepted. She had a clue that this woman wouldn’t stop until she agreed and she simply didn’t have the time to waste.

Joanna Greene helped her pull the dress up, zip it in the back, and the brown girl examined herself in the mirror. She had to admit that she looked good, and if her words weren’t enough to win Brandon back, she had this...

They blow dried her hair and Natalie assembled it in the best and simplest and most efficient way she could, opting for a side-parted chignon, and Joanna handed her a pair of black chandelier earrings and the pair of black stilettos, that, when she put them on, made her a giant.

“Now, step back for a second, let me get a good look at you,” Joanna Greene said, pushing the girl back, looking her up and down.

And the woman smiled softly, sighing to herself, and she said, “You look like an angel, honey...now let’s get going...”

She’d wanted to thank Joanna for helping her, but there wasn’t time. She spent most of the car ride thinking of what she’d say to Brandon, how he’d react when he saw her, hoping that he wouldn’t completely shun her, hoping that he’d understand, hoping that he’d believe her.

He had to...

The oldest hotel in all of Saratoga, the Inn was a renovated green Victorian home, set peacefully on Broadway, quaintly decorated with flowers, nineteenth century trimmings, and the occasional portrait of some famous person who’d visited over the span of its one hundred or so years of existence.

Joanna took Natalie by the hand, took her through the lobby that smelled of fresh linen and old wood, past a series of rooms on the first floor, to the Grand Ballroom, dimly lit, with hardwood flooring, round tables, dressed in burgundy cloth about, and a long white table overlooking the small dance floor where Jack and Martha sat, snuggled close to each other.

When Joanna and Natalie entered the room John was giving a toast. Joanna had pushed the door so hard that it caused John to slip up his words a little and caused a few of the listeners to turn and look in their direction.

Joanna and Natalie snickered at each other and scurried to the first open chairs that they saw.

John finished his toast and Mark stood up next, keeping his short and sweet, telling his parents how much they meant to him, explaining that he learned what love really meant from them.

“And blah, blah, blah,” Joanna whispered, causing Natalie to laugh, causing the old, white-haired couple that shared the table with them to stare at her.

Natalie shamefully cleared her throat, then watched as Brandon stood up next, looking very handsome in his black suit and combed and parted hair. Her stomach felt funny.

“Forty years is an outstanding achievement,” he began, clearing his throat. “Especially in a time, like today, where relationships beckon so many uncertainties, so many problems. Forty years is an outstanding achievement because love takes patience, love takes understanding...takes an understanding of each other’s differences, takes compromise, takes communication, takes an appreciation of where each comes from, and loving that, and going along with that...”

Natalie watched as Brandon cut his eyes to his mother subtly before clearing his throat and continuing.

“Because of the example that my wonderful parents set before me, I was able to find love with someone who is starkly different from me, who, I can honestly say, I barely have anything in common with...no, we don’t make any sense together...but, we feel so right together...and...what my parents need to understand is that I love her...[Brandon looks at his mother]...I really, really love her...and marrying her is something that I’ve always dreamed of doing...you can’t stop me...you can’t...you can’t fucking stop me...”

Brandon dropped the microphone that he was holding, Mark and Matt stood up, grabbing at him, but he shoved them off, ducking through a side door.

Joanna leaned into her. “If ever there was a time to go after him, Natalie...this would be it...”

She didn’t hesitate. She stood up from her seat, while the guests of the Greene Anniversary party sat in silence, while the Greene parents looked completely dumbfounded. She scurried in her long black gown across the dance floor, in front of the Greene coupling, watching the Greene brothers eye her, watching Martha’s mouth drop, through the side door, which her fiancé had gone, which lead toward the outdoors.

He hadn’t gone far. He sat on a set of steps, leading from the door. The rain had stopped. His head was lowered with defeat and he ran his fingers through his thick hair, spouting, “Fuck,” with frustration, burying his face in his hands, before he knew that she was standing there.

She gathered the dress between her fingers, descended a couple of stairs, kneeling before him, her fingers, grazing at his knees. He looked down at her, his eyes reddened and puffy.

He shoved her off. “Natalie, go away...”

She touched him again.

He pushed her away again. “Stop it...you drive me crazy...you make me say things that I shouldn’t say...you made me curse at my parents...you made me chase you...I can’t stand you, you know that? You make me do things that I don’t like doing...I fucking can’t stand you...what am I supposed to do if you go away for real? What am I supposed to do without you, huh?”

She heard his voice break.

She touched him, sliding her hands up his thighs, pressing her forehead against his. “I’m not going anywhere, baby...”

And he looked at her. “Can you promise me that? Can you?”

She kissed his lips once, savored the taste, the feel and sighed. “Yes, I think that I can...”

Chapter 19

A CHANDLER
CHRISTMAS



JOANNA WAYLAND hailed from Brooklyn. She was born into a roman catholic Irish family of five children in a tight brownstone in historic Cobble Hill. With her intelligence, sassiness, and overall rebellious demeanor, she was able to stand out from the rest of her siblings, and equally managed to send her strict, religious parents in an uproar, only giving them relief when she was accepted at Harvard University back in the nineties. She initially studied business, because of her parent's strong desire for her to do so, but it wasn't till she met tall, handsome Mark Greene, an apprentice to the pastry chef at a restaurant in Cambridge, that she discovered her love of cooking, pushing her to leave school, move in with him, and make the moves to start a business of their own.

Jo's Dessert & Coffee of Vinegar Hill...

When Mark brought the fiery, bohemian redhead with her feather earrings, floor-length sundress and liberal aura home to meet the parents, Martha Greene wasn't at all pleased, citing the fact that Jo was a little "too wild" for conservative Mark. Nevertheless, they married two months later on a whim in Las Vegas, only making Martha Greene angrier. Julie Ann Greene came a year later.

"It's a catholic thing," Jo explained over the phone to Natalie nearly a month following the Saratoga anniversary party disaster. "Not a racial thing. Mother's are far more protective of their sons. Trust me, I have four brothers and I swear that my mother was trying to set them up with anyone and everyone in Cobble Hill. Don't worry, she'll get over it..."

Natalie couldn't explain why she immediately attached to Joanna, why their phone conversations from Georgia to New York and vice versa lasted so long, why she started asking her future sister-in-law questions about her wedding, why she was just so cool, and so easy to talk to that you would never be able to suspect that she was the mother of a three-year-old girl, and she couldn't understand why Asha and Maya and Sidney were so bothered when she informed them that she'd elected Joanna to be the fourth bridesmaid.

"Nat, seriously," Asha began as they window-shopped in downtown Athens a few days before Thanksgiving.

Maya and Sidney came down to visit for a couple of days to help her select a dress.

"Don't you think that this is all happening a little too fast?" Maya suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Asking this girl to be your bridesmaid..." Maya said, locking her arm with hers.

"What's so fast about it?"

"You barely know her..." Asha added, reaching for her other arm.

"We're getting to know each other," Natalie explained, stopping in front of Eve's Dress Shoppe. "She's a great person..."

"We haven't even met the girl," Sidney said. "How do we know that she's not some psychopath?"

“That’s a little overdramatic, don’t you think?” Natalie chuckled. “Girls, trust me, I wouldn’t be trying to get to know her if I thought she was crazy...besides, Brandon’s practically in love with her...and I trust his opinion...you people are being silly...”

“Sure, we’re silly,” Asha began. “Because we’re trying to look out for you...”

“How can you be so judgmental of someone you’ve never met before?”

“And when will we meet this person?” Sidney asked.

“The holidays,” Natalie said. “I’ve invited her and Brandon’s brother, Mark, down here for New Years...”

“This just gets better and better, doesn’t it?” Maya said, throwing her hands in the air with exasperation. “Soon, she’ll be planning it for you!”

“Not true,” Natalie replied, rolling her eyes.

She decided then to refrain from telling them about the fact that she not only elected Joanna to be her bridesmaid, she also asked her to do the wedding cake and the hors d’oeuvres for the reception, and that she’d agreed with no charge...

“You’re about to be family,” Jo had told her, chuckling. “We’ll just put it on your tab...”

There was very little money for the wedding. They hadn’t saved very much, choosing to spend the money that they didn’t spend, on their individual rent and other bills on groceries, on gifts, plane tickets and clothes. Helen Chandler refused to put

any money forth for the wedding, and after the scene they’d made at Jack and Martha’s fortieth wedding anniversary dinner, the Greenes were certainly less than thrilled about laying any money on the table as well.

Brandon and Natalie each sat down in the house on Trent road, a few days following the Thanksgiving holiday, compiled a list of the people that they really wanted to come, including friends and family, excluding those acquaintances that they hadn’t talk to in years. Narrowing the list down meant that they would be feeding less mouths, thus, they could bend the cost a little, which meant that Natalie could spend a little bit more money on the dress she wanted. They opted on not sending out engagement announcements, throwing an engagement party, or any other cheesy, rather unnecessary pre-nuptial event. Natalie could only focus on the wedding day itself. And finally, after establishing the tiny budget of two thousand dollars, they realized that they couldn’t afford going on a honeymoon, or, at least the one that they’d dreamed of going on. At the point that they sat on the couch, they realized that they could barely afford a hotel room.

Natalie tried to assure him that all she wanted to do was marry him, and all the frills and fancies of the wedding didn’t matter to her.

But they did.

She internally admitted that she was one of those girls who hung a pillowcase off the back of her head, pretending as she were a bride, marrying whatever snot-nosed boy she had a

crush on at the time. She'd always wanted the dream wedding, always wanted the big, white princess dress, always wanted to get married in the church she grew up in. But, as she watched her fiancé fumble through his financial records, as if he were trying to search for some hidden money that he'd stashed away and forgotten about, she couldn't help but feel her heart fall at the sight, watching those dreams crumble right before her eyes.

"Two thousand isn't a lot," Brandon began, as they got ready for bed. "But, we can make it work, can't we? I mean, I know my way around a computer, we can make invitations on there, and Maya's pretty nifty, she can do flower arrangements and stuff like that..."

"Sure..." she agreed, climbing into bed beside him.

He pulled her near him, exhaled when they got settled, and he reached over and turned off his lamplight.

"It's not the end of the world," he whispered to her in the darkness, sensing her unease. "We can make this work..."

Sure, they could. If they could dump their significant others at the drop of a hat just to be together, curse at their parents, create a scene in front of hundreds of guests at an anniversary dinner, then they could definitely make this work...

She told Jo about her financial woes while en route to Decatur for Christmas. She'd taken off two weeks from work to be with her family and she planned on enjoying it, and, in the process, trying to convince her mother that Brandon was still the person that she intended to spend the rest of her life with.

"That's a sticky situation," Joanna Greene said with a sigh. "But, what you should realize is, is the fact that not every wedding has to be the huge, grand affair that we all dream about...in the end, it's about you and Brandon...it may not be what you dreamed of, but being surrounded by your friends and family and the love of your life should be enough satisfaction..."

Although Jo made so much sense, she couldn't help but feel the same, considering herself spoiled, childish and selfish, knowing that Brandon was putting up twice as much money as she was and yet she still wanted more.

But she kept quiet. She knew that that would be the best thing, knew that it would keep the tension at bay, and she tried to convince herself that it was just one day...just one day...

Brandon elected to spend the holidays with her and her family in Georgia, and she thought that they'd made progress when Helen hesitantly agreed to let him stay on the couch in the den.

"He won't enjoy himself," Helen huffed, fumbling around in the kitchen over Thanksgiving. "Why doesn't he spend Christmas with his own family? Won't they miss him sitting at the dining room table in front of a dry turkey and runny cranberry sauce? Won't they miss him sitting by the marble fireplace, sipping on high-end tea and singing terrible renditions of Christmas carols? Why on earth would he want to miss out on all of that fun?"

“Because he wants to spend the holidays with me,” Natalie said firmly, folding her arms. “He wants the southern Christmas experience...and I think that this is the best place to get that, don’t you, Mama?”

“Fine,” Helen Chandler said. “But does the boy have to stay in the house?”

“Yes, Mama, yes he does. If you’d like, he can sleep in my bed with me...”

Natalie knew that this would irk her mother, and she anticipated the moment that her mother’s lips would curl tightly, as if she were imagining the idea of her daughter’s white fiancé with his arms wrapped around her, kissing and rubbing on her. Oh, what a travesty!

“Natalie Savannah, no such nonsense will go on during Christmas. He’ll sleep on the couch, right in front of the Christmas tree. And he’ll help your grandmother and I put the presents under the tree for your cousins.”

“Nothing else would make him happier, Ma,” Natalie smiled.

Natalie wasn’t sure about how he’d feel about her setting aside a couple hundred dollars for the Seiko watch he’d seen in a shop in Athens, after his old one cracked. She also wasn’t sure about how he’d feel about the extra fifty or so she’d spent on getting the back of it engraved with the initials BDG. She only hoped that he appreciated the gesture, not caring if he got her anything in return. She would completely understand.

He’d flown into the Atlanta airport the night before Christmas Eve and she and Maya went to retrieve him promptly, her, leaping into his arms and kissing his cheeks as if she hadn’t seen him in an extended period of time, him thereafter, giving Maya a hug and a polite kiss on the cheek. They walked to baggage claim with their arms around each other, she, finding it hard to contain her excitement.

This was the first Christmas that they’d ever spent together! This was really happening, wasn’t it? She couldn’t wait to show him all of their traditions, old photos, and coax him into singing Christmas songs like she and her family did every year. Her only worry was her mother.

How would she feel having Brandon around, drinking her homemade eggnog? Eating her honey-baked ham? Sitting by the Christmas tree on Christmas morning? She only hoped that her mother remained placid, that her mother would attach to Brandon’s easiness as much as she had once upon a time.

She soared down West Trinity Place under a starlit sky, held Brandon’s hand over the handbrake as she crossed over College avenue, and headed west up the Ponce de Leon to the suburban forest, near Clarkston, where she could annually smell the burning of wood in the distance, like the burning of kindling in a fireplace. Up a hill and down another, her black Camry disappeared among the fencing of naked trees, her windows fogged from the frost, her music playing lowly, Brandon,

running his thumb along her skin, the level of her excitement and her fear rising.

She prayed to God then that her mother didn't kill him. She prayed to God that they could get through the holiday without her mother saying something mean to him. She's probably sure that he felt the same way. He was quiet again, reserved again, and she could feel the nervousness in the tension of his hand. She wished then that she weren't driving. She wished that she could wrap her arms around him, kiss the side of his face and tell him that he shouldn't worry, that she'd take care of him, for once, as he'd done for her so, so many times before.

She cascaded down another hill, and pulled into the short driveway of her childhood house, with black shutters, moldy brick and a wraparound porch with chipped white paint.

This time, she helped him with his bag, and they entered the house, Brandon, with his arm tossed across Maya's shoulder, into the low lit and warm interior, that smelled of Mama's cooking, and a television, blaring from her living room.

"Ma!" Maya called into the house, tossing her purse onto the worn living room sofa, a piece of furniture that she and her sisters spent many years jumping on and off of.

"Mama!" Natalie repeated, placing Brandon's overnight bag down, reaching for his hand.

Natalie and Maya found their mother over the stove, in the narrow kitchen, with both Aunt Miriam and Aunt June, sitting at the round wooden kitchen table. Maya kissed the side of her

mother's face as Helen said, "Maya, please don't scream like that, what will I do without that beautiful squeaky voice of yours?"

"Sorry, Ma," Maya said, placing herself at the table with her aunts.

Helen Chandler then looked at the engaged couple and sighed, simultaneously stirring the boiling pot before her.

"I'm making tomato soup," she said simply, pursing her brown lips. "I assume that the boy hasn't eaten since he left New York."

"No, ma'am, I haven't..."

"Very well," Helen said. "Natalie get a plate and set it down at the table for him..."

Natalie did as she was told, heading toward the cabinets above the sink and retrieving a small bowl with blue trim down, and handing it to her mother.

"Thank you," Helen sighed, scooping a few spoonfuls into the bowl. "Now tell the boy to sit down at the table and stop looking all awkward."

Brandon did as he was told, and Helen sat the bowl down in front of him, on a red placemat with white snowflakes.

"Good to know that we didn't run the boy off," Aunt Miriam said, looking at Aunt June.

Aunt June nodded and said, "He's a good one, isn't he, Helen?"

“Do you mind not talking about him like he’s not here?” Maya reminded them, retracting slightly when Helen gave her a cross look.

“I agree with that,” Natalie said quietly, doing the same as her sister when her mother looked in her direction.

“Oh, we meant nothing by it, darlin’,” Aunt Miriam said, patting him on the back. “We were just making an observation...ain’t that right, Juney?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Aunt June said. “Just an observation, baby...”

...

He’d never heard some of the Christmas music that they played on the stereo in the cozy den, adjacent to the kitchen. But he liked it. Especially the Donny Hathaway one called, “This Christmas”, that Natalie sang softly while swiveling her hips gracefully. It was refreshing, and definitely sounded a lot better than hearing “King Wenceslas” each year, in front of a plate of runny mince meat pie and cold, stiff green beans. The song presented itself with warmth, a glow, and a sort of soul that he wasn’t used to...the kind that put him at ease, especially considering that Helen and the two aunts were in the back bedroom. He could barely finish his soup with Helen Chandler, staring at him ardently, like she wanted his head as the centerpiece for dinner on Christmas day. He almost wished that Natalie had stopped rubbing the top of his head (some-

thing that gave him pleasure on any ordinary occasion). With each stroke of her fiancée brown hands, Brandon could see her mother get visibly agitated with her. He tried to convince himself then that it was only his mind playing tricks on him. After all, the woman fed him. That in itself seemed a solid step in the right direction.

He sat by the brick fireplace, while Natalie and her sisters wrapped presents by a humble fir, decorated with old ornaments from years past, a few streams of tinsel and balls of red and gold.

“I’m glad Brandon’s here,” Maya began, reaching for the scissors. “So he can finally see how terrible you are at wrapping.”

Brandon couldn’t help but laugh. Of course he couldn’t help but recall the two consecutive Christmases of wrapped boxes with the paper hanging off, and Natalie smiling endearingly as she handed him his present.

“I’m sorry,” she’d said. “I tried...”

Sure, she did. Lucky for her, he was less concerned about the wrapping job and more concerned with the gift, which, she’d always deliver. Natalie was always good for getting him something useful for a gift, something he’d mentioned and didn’t think anyone heard.

Ha, she always did...

“She doesn’t know it,” Sidney began, leaning in as if to keep the information private. “But me and Mama always have

to go back and do hers over, because Mama doesn't want the presents from our house to look bad..."

Natalie stopped dancing, looked down at her older sister, and poked her in the side of the head. "I knew it!"

"Ha, she actually thought that she was good," Maya chuckled.

"It doesn't matter how it's wrapped," Natalie defended, placing her hands on her hips. "Ain't that right, Brandon?"

Brandon nodded, grinning slowly. "I can agree with that..."

"Thank you," his fiancée replied. "He's basically saying that my gifts are better, too..."

"I didn't hear that come out of his mouth, Nattie," Sidney said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, that's what he meant," Natalie assured them. "Because I know him...better than anyone else...ain't that right?"

Hell, yes, he could definitely agree with that. That skinny girl knew him better even when he didn't want her to, even when he was so mad at her that he couldn't think straight.

He nodded. "Yes, Tallie, you do..."

"Are you sure you want to marry her?" Maya asked him, arching her right eyebrow, the same way Natalie does when he says something that she thinks is stupid.

Yes, he was quite sure, against all odds. He was even more sure as they stole looks at each other from across the room, her winking delicately at him, teasing him. He was as sure as his urge to take that girl in his arms that very moment and take

her in their own little world, that they rarely escape to anymore. Hell yes, that world that only they understood, that allowed him to kiss those amazing brown lips over and over again with relentless strength and power and passion, smell that vanilla perfumy scent that he'd been detecting on her neck since she was seventeen years old, run his fingers through her soft coarse hair, laugh at the silliness that she only portrayed around him, feeling his heart tighten each time that she whispered that she loved him into his face.

Brandon nodded again. "Yes, I'm sure..."

They retired on the couch, killed the lights, and watched television as the fire in the fireplace died down. Natalie found a home against his chest, and fell asleep sometime after a Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer Claymation movie commenced. After her sisters teased her a little bit, bid him a quick good-night as they pulled her up by her arms, as she groggily mumbled, "Put me down, you monkeys."

Maya gathered her sister in her arms, saying, "Come on Nat, get off Brandon's bed..."

Ha, oh how he wanted her to stay.

The two Chandler sisters proceeded to drag their taller sister down the hallway, but she stopped them suddenly.

"Nat, what in the world are you doin'?" Sidney asked, smiling.

Brandon watched as Natalie turned around, broke away from her sisters, dragging her feet toward him. She then pro-

ceeded to fall against him, he, who lay on his back, causing a noise of discomfort to come his mouth.

Natalie took the side of his face and kissed his lips once.

“I forgot to say ‘Goodnight’,” she admitted, smiling at him.

“Oh, I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit,”

Maya teased.

“Goodnight,” he told her, kissing her once more. “And I love you...”

“I love you too,” she whispered, climbing off of him.

She rejoined her sisters, wrapping her arms around them and they continued their way down the hallway.

Yes, sir...against all odds...

The smell of bacon woke him up the next morning, accompanied by stinging sunshine, “Jingle Bells” on the radio and clanging pots. He sat up slowly, wiped his eyes, and attempted to find the source of the noise. For some strange reason, he was confident of the source as he swung his feet to the floor, and stood up, adjusting his pajama bottoms and scratching his belly. This moment reminded him of so many weekend mornings where he’d wake up to the very same smell, shuffle to the kitchen and find Natalie bent over the stove, frying something and humming to herself.

Yawning, he was startled when he passed through the doorway of the kitchen, and witnessed an older version of Natalie, running about the kitchen. Consequently, he thought he might

have startled her too, because she dropped the stick of butter that she had in her hand.

“Jesus in Heaven!” Helen Chandler said, grasping her chest. “You scared me, boy!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Chandler,” he replied meekly. “I thought you were someone else...”

“I see,” she replied, giving him the same look as last night.

She then looked down at his feet and cleared her throat. “I don’t allow bare feet in my kitchen,” she told him.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” he told her, backtracking.

“You’ll know next time,” she said, bending down to pick up her stick of butter. “Now, go to the bathroom down the hall and wash that sleepy look off your face, then brush your teeth and put on some socks...you did bring socks, didn’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, swallowing hard.

“Very well then,” she said. “I don’t allow dirty faces, dirty mouths and dirty feet in my kitchen...my girls have learned that those types of people don’t get fed...”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said again.

He turned around, felt his heart start again, and just as he thought he’d escaped, she called out, “Oh, Boy...?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Merry Christmas Eve...”

He found the bathroom without any help, down the narrow, shadowed hallway and to the right, just past a bedroom where the door was cracked. There, he saw Natalie, asleep, laying on her back, with her two sisters by her side, one, with her

face buried in Natalie's armpit, and the other with her back toward her. He sat there for a moment, leaned up against the doorway, and he watched her, smiling to himself. He then continued down the hallway toward the bathroom.

He returned to the kitchen in twenty minutes, hoping that his appearance pleased Ms. Chandler's eyes, spotting Natalie, Maya and Sidney, sitting at the round kitchen table by the window, each with bare brown feet and sleepy, bed-smashed faces.

Helen Chandler looked up from her frying pan over the stove and grinned. "I'm glad you could join us, Boy...I didn't think that you were goin' to make it..."

Ha, she was probably hoping that he didn't, hoping that she could have her three daughters to herself.

O Contraire, evil mother. He would not give up that easily.

He approached the kitchen table, leaned down the kiss the top of his Natalie's head, and sat down in the chair next to her. Shortly following, the mother delivered plates of pancakes, scrambled eggs and bacon to her three daughters. She then locked eyes with him, cleared her throat and said, "In this house, we feed ourselves."

Natalie replaced her glass of orange juice, slid her plate in his direction, said, "Here, sweetheart," and got up to fix herself another plate.

He smiled on the inside.

Helen and Natalie joined the table, and the family ate in silence for a moment.

Then, Maya cleared her throat and pleasantly asked, "So, how are your plans coming along?"

"Plans?" Natalie repeated, dropping her fork.

"Yes, dummy," Maya said, rolling her eyes. "You two are getting married, aren't you?"

Natalie looked at him. "Of course we are..."

"So...got anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like...when is the date, where are you getting married, who are you going to invite? Who's going to be in the wedding party...?"

Natalie looked at him again, shoving a morsel into her mouth.

"Well," his fiancée began. "I haven't asked Brandon yet, but I've been thinking about a date..."

"Oh yeah?" he asked, feeling his eyebrow arch in her direction.

She nodded. "Yes...I've been thinking August fifteenth..."

He felt his stomach do something funny.

"August fifteenth?" Sidney asked. "What's so special about that date?"

Natalie smiled at him.

"It's my birthday," he said lowly.

"And," Natalie continued, swallowing the piece in her mouth. "It's the day we met...if he even remembers that..."

Of course he did. Of course he remembered that tall, pretty girl with that amazing brown skin, and long curly hair.

How could he have forgotten? He refused to tell her that although he woke up the next morning with the most incredible hangover, the moment he attempted to retrace what had happened the previous night in his mind, Natalie Chandler was one of the first instances to pop up.

“Are you crazy?” was all that he asked her.

He watched her eyes fall, the way they always did when she blushed.

Classic Tallie.

“So, I take it that you like that date?” Sidney asked with a smile.

Brandon nodded. “Yes, Baby, I do...”

“Well,” Helen Chandler said, clearing her throat. “I think it’s the dumbest idea Nattie’s ever had.”

“Mama...” Sidney said.

“Honestly, Baby,” the mother began. “Having it on the boy’s birthday?”

“It holds significance, Ma,” Maya defended. “I think it’s romantic...”

“It’s Natalie’s wedding, Mama,” Sidney began, taking a sip of her orange juice. “Let her have it when she wants...”

“You know, I hate to say it,” Helen began. “But if you were still dating Anthony, we wouldn’t be having this problem...”

“Mama,” Maya said suddenly.

Ha, Evil Mother struck again. At that moment of complete awkward silence, he attempted not to show that hearing

the name of Natalie’s ex-boyfriend didn’t make him cringe inside, and he found it quite hard to swallow the glob of pancake mush in his mouth.

He only hoped that Natalie said something soon, before he jumped across the table and strangled her mother.

“Mama,” Natalie began quietly. “We’ve been over this before...”

He was sure that he had not heard this discussion before, and hoped that Natalie refreshed her mother’s memory.

“Anthony and I were a mistake,” Natalie began slowly. “I did not want to be with him...Brandon is the man that I want to be with.”

Take that, Evil Mother! She wanted to be with him. He, who was sure that he’d told her convoluted mother that he loved her daughter to a crazy degree. Now, why in God’s name could she think that going back to Anthony would make more sense?

“Don’t ruin Christmas, Mama,” Cheerful Maya said, placing her small hand on her mother’s. “They’ve set a date and let that be that...”

He was sure that Maya’s power of being the baby of the family had a hand in shutting their mother up, for the remainder of breakfast, and even as she hovered over the kitchen sink to wash dishes. She didn’t even protest when he reached his hands into the sink with her, offering his services. It was then that he took a deep breath. He would give himself time. He would give himself enough time to allow Helen Chandler to

appreciate him. Patience was the key with this woman, hardened and broken, and stern, who looked so much like Natalie that it scared him.

He would coach himself to breathe. He would take each insult that was flung at him in stride. Hell, he felt he had to. He was going to be there for another three weeks.

The Chandler family adhered to the tradition of going to Granny Marie's each Christmas Eve night, at the brick house at the end of Hargrove Street, decorated with white lights in the naked crepe myrtles, fake, cotton-like snow draped on the shrubbery, and a Black Santa welcome mat beneath an artificial green wreath with bright red poinsettias on the glass storm door. The night was chilly, and Brandon entered into a warm, amber-lit interior, that smelled instantly of food, with its living room, occupied by a small circle of male family members, playing cards on the couch, next to a white brick fireplace, and a tall Christmas tree, decorated with lights that played holiday tunes, and a mantle, dressed with garland and nameless stockings, beneath a row of baby pictures. He walked toward the baby pictures and smiled, recognizing his Natalie instantly, with her long pigtails, and buckteeth. Maya's picture sat to the left of her older sister's, and he consider her to be the most attractive in her younger years, with slightly darker skin than Natalie, coarser, lighter hair, a pug nose and an impeccably bright smile. He could tell that Maya's light shone even before he met her. To the right of Natalie's was Sidney's picture, and though she couldn't have been more than ten when the photograph

was taken, he could tell that she was certainly the most mature of the three sisters. Her hair had a slight wave to it, and her skin complexion reminded him of a Hershey's kiss. In that picture alone, she looked most like Evil Mother. Strangely, Natalie looked the least.

"Here, Brandon," Sidney said, reaching at his collar, startling him. "Let me get your coat."

"Thank you," he replied, watching Natalie and Maya disappear into the kitchen after they greeted their family members in the living room. He stood awkwardly by the Christmas tree, hoping that he didn't step on any of the presents below him, hoping that someone acknowledged him soon.

Moments later, one of Natalie's uncles glanced up from his playing hand and chuckled, nudging another one of Natalie's uncles seated next to him.

"Helen didn't scare him off yet, Joe," the uncle said.

Uncle Joe chuckled. "I see, I see...you like cards, Boy?"

"Or do you want to go into the kitchen with the women and cook...you aren't one of those kinds, are you?"

Hell no. If only they knew how terrible he was in the kitchen.

"What are you playing?" he asked.

"My kinda guy," Uncle Joe said. "Hot damn, grab a seat..."

He did as he was told, and they had to re-deal the hand. "You know how to play Pitty Pat, son?" one of the Uncles asked him.

Brandon shook his head. "No, sir, I don't..."

Then men in the circle all made a noise. He couldn't tell if it was good or bad.

"Well then, son," Uncle Joe said. "I'll teach you...I'll teach you how to whoop all these boy's asses...I taught Nattie, you know..."

"Yea, she told me," he smiled.

"Good, good," the uncle said. "Now here's what you gotta do first..."

Uncle Joe was probably the best drunken teacher that he'd ever had, and in a matter of minutes, it seemed, he was winning every hand, beating Uncle Joe and Uncle Ron and Uncle Marty, and Uncle Joe's sixteen-year-old son Marcus, then Uncle Marty's thirteen-year-old son Cory, then comical Marcus again, then shy Cory again.

"Oh, this white boy is good," Uncle Joe said. "Ain't he good, Martin?"

"Yea, Joe," Uncle Martin began. "If we were betting money, I'd be broke..."

They all shared a laugh, and Natalie entered the room again, wearing the black Guess sweater that Asha helped him pick out for her twenty-third birthday this past fall, wearing that high ponytail that he always loved. She placed a hand on his head.

"Y'all better not be in here giving him a hard time," Natalie warned, stroking his head slowly. "What are y'all playing?"

"Oh, what else, Nattie, my girl?" Uncle Joe said. "Pitty Pat..."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Oh, my, Lord. Are you kickin' tail, Baby?"

Brandon nodded confidently.

"He's doin' a lot better than Natalie ever did in Pitty Pat," Young Marcus teased.

"Oh yea?" Natalie began, laughing a little. "Last time I checked, Marcus Chandler, Maya and Sid and me beat you three times in a row...each...was that last year?"

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Well, I bet you that you can't beat me again...I'm older now...you can't boss me around like you used to..."

Natalie patted Brandon on the back. "Baby, my grandma wanted to speak with you...go and see what she wants, and I'll bet you that by the time you get back, I'll have whooped my cousin's behind three times over..."

Brandon entered a kitchen of wood paneling, old carpeting, a breakfast bar with vinyl topping, images of Jesus on the wall, the sound of boiling pots, and at least six women, some with smaller children around them, sitting at a long maple kitchen table, staring at him.

Marie Chandler stood by the stove, dressed in a red apron with the image of a Black, rosy-cheeked Santa on the front, with her arms extended in his direction.

“How dare you come into my house and not speak to me!” the grandmother said, enveloping him in her embrace. “You almost hurt my feelings.”

He was glad to see her the most, he was sure of it. Granny Marie’s touch was so inviting, so warm, and her giggle and sweet drawl made him laugh.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Chandler...”

“Boy, what did I tell you? Call me ‘Granny’...”

“Granny,” he said, trying it out. “I’m sorry...I was playing cards in the living room...”

“So I heard,” Granny Marie smiled. “Got you playin’ Pitty Pat, huh?”

“Yes, ma’am...”

“Well, I have to get in on a game after I finish all of this cookin’,” she said, winking at him. “My son’s and grandson’s don’t have you bettin’ money, do they?”

“No, ma’am,” he replied.

“Good, good,” she said, peeking into a pot. “You want some eggnog, Brandon? It’s homemade...it’s got rum in it...strictly for adults...Nattie tells me that you like to go out and drink...”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, wishing Natalie hadn’t told her grandmother that. “On occasion...”

“Well, grab yourself a cup, boy and have at it...then go sit down at the kitchen table and get to know your family...”

He did as he was told. Within minutes, he’d met Uncle Joe’s wife, Susanna, and their seven-year-old daughter, Alicia;

Uncle Marty’s wife, Rhonda and their five-year-old boy, Michael; and Uncle Ron’s second wife, Anita. He was then informed that Aunt Miriam’s husband, Gerald and Aunt June’s husband, Willie were downstairs in the basement, watching basketball on the big-screen television. He was then invited by Aunt Miriam, who wore several gold rings and a Santa hat on her head, to go downstairs and watch the game with them if he wanted. He declined the offer, opting to stay closer to the grandmother, and even closer to the living room, where he could hear Natalie laughing with her uncles and cousins, while “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” dinged on the Christmas tree.

And while the ham baked, Granny Marie made her way into the living room, loosened her apron and sat down in between Natalie and Uncle Ron, signaling for one of her sons to deal her a hand.

“Granny, don’t beat me too bad,” Natalie teased, readjusting the cards in her hand. Brandon stood in the doorway between the living room and kitchen, and only watched until one of the uncles looked up at him, and said, “Boy, come sit down here...we got a hand ready for you...it’ll make things more interesting...”

He sighed and sat down next to Cory.

“Never thought you’d play against me, baby,” Natalie teased, peeking up from her hand.

He grinned, winked at her and said, “Don’t worry, Talie...it’ll feel even worse when I beat you...”

The rest of the Chandler family made some sort of “Oohing” noise then chuckled.

“We’ll see about that,” she replied, plucking from the deck.

Ha, neither of them won. But that didn’t stop them from laughing at each of the uncles because they thought that they were winning, or hearing Uncle Marty complain constantly about how annoying he thought the musical tree lights were. Granny won, and she finished off the rest of her homemade eggnog to celebrate, before walking into the kitchen again to finish cooking.

If anything, he was glad that he would marry into a family that knew how to cook food and knew how to celebrate Christmas. Before anyone could eat, they stood in a circle and each grabbed hands, and Helen elected that he say a prayer for them. He discovered that the last person to pray over the family was Granddaddy Joseph, who’d succumbed to lung cancer five years prior. He couldn’t remember the last time that he prayed so formally. Could it have been at Mass a couple of Christmases ago? At least...

He knew nothing about the way that Baptists prayed, with the exception of the times that he’d overheard Natalie praying just before bed. Still, he took a deep breath anyway, felt Natalie run her thumb along his hand for comfort, and he began as the family lowered their heads and closed their eyes.

“Dear Lord [Jeez, was that even right? Evil Mother struck again]...thank you...thank you...for...thank you for allowing us to meet this Christmas Eve [phew, he didn’t think that he would get that one out]...safely...thank you for allowing us to meet this Christmas Eve safely...thank you...thank you for my fiancée...Natalie...she is perhaps the most incredible person that I have ever met...and thank you...thank you for placing her into my life...[wow, it just got easier and easier]...thank you for allowing me to spend time with the Chandler Family...and I pray that...that...we can continue to become closer and closer as each day passes...thank you...um...Amen...”

The family said a collective “Amen”, raised their heads, opened their eyes, and Granny Marie said, “Well done, Boy... couldn’t have said it better myself...”

Natalie kissed him on the cheek and reached for his arm. “You hungry, Greene?”

He nodded.

“Well, go and sit down, and I’ll fix you something...”

Good because he was starved, and maybe Natalie could distract her mother, and that way she could stop looking at him in such a way that suggested that she wanted to kill him or perform some sort of sadistic act on his testicles.

Stop it, Brandon, stop. Just relax...

He took a deep breath, and looked at Natalie, hovering over the stove, laughing with her sisters. Ah, he could breathe again. Just by looking at her, just by looking so relaxed, so in tuned with spending time with her family. God, he respected

her so much for that, and he could understand why Christmas was so important to her, why she spent so much time explaining to him their traditions, and how they kept them alive. When he looked at her, he certainly wasn't the neurotic headcase that sensed that his future mother-in-law was out to get him, he was a man who couldn't wait for the future, a man who couldn't wait to make that girl his wife, a man who heard "This Christmas" in his mind, and was almost certain that he felt her soul running rampant inside of him.

After everyone had eaten, the Chandler Family, traditionally gather in the living room to exchange gifts, and each of the grandchildren—which included Natalie, Maya, Sidney, Cory, Marcus, Michael and Alicia—were each allowed to open one present from Granny Marie before morning. Alicia sat on Natalie's lap as she passed out the gifts that she'd purchased for her family, giggling, "Are you ready for Santa Claus? Are you? I bet you've been a good girl, haven't you?" Alicia would nod, would smile giddily and clap her hands. Granny Marie who'd disappeared into a back room, returned with a trash bag, and dumped it out on the floor in front of the Christmas tree.

"Dig in, children," she instructed. "They're all labeled, so I don't want to hear any gripes. And remember...size does not matter..."

Brandon watched a Granny Marie looked in Natalie's direction and winked.

Once the other grandchildren had retrieved their gifts, Natalie dug in the bag for hers, and after shuffling through for a moment, she came up with a white envelope with her name on it. Then, she looked at him.

"Open it, baby," he told her, nodding in her direction.

"No, no," Granny Marie said with the wave of her hand. "Natalie, you should wait till you get home..."

"But Granny..."

"Don't 'But Granny' me," she said. "Just do as you're told..."

"Yes ma'am..."

Natalie felt she'd waited long enough when they sat on the couch together a couple hours after leaving Granny Marie's, in front of a roaring fire, in the shadowed house on Green Hill Street, encircled by the whistling winter wind. Her mother and her sisters had gone to bed several minutes prior, after Helen threatened his life if he ventured into the back bedrooms where Natalie was in the middle of the night. So, Natalie opted to stay on the couch with him...well, at least until he fell asleep...or, at least until he found out what was in that envelope. She pulled a blanket over her legs, rested her head on his shoulder, and juggled the envelope between her fingers.

"So, are you going to open it?" he asked her, nudging her slightly.

She only sighed. "I suppose...it can't be much...there's not much that you can fit into an envelope..."

“Remember what she said, ‘Size doesn’t matter’, baby...”

“I know, I know,” she said. “But when you see Maya and Sid get these big ol’ boxes, you kind of feel...you know...”

“Shitted...”

“Not on Christmas Eve, Brandon...”

“Sorry...ripped off...”

“Yes, that’s better...”

“Just open it, Tal,” he said. “It can’t be that bad...you’re being overdramatic...”

“You’re right, you’re right...why don’t you open it?”

“Me? It doesn’t say Brandon on there,” he told her, rolling his eyes.

“Natalie, Brandon...potato, potato...”

“I like the way you think...”

Natalie huffed and spoke a little louder. “Brandy, open it...”

“Shhh, you’ll wake up your mother...”

“Open it...”

“Fine, you big baby, fine...”

He snatched the envelope from her, sighed and opened it swiftly, gliding his finger along the back. “See?” he said. “Not that hard...”

“What’s in it?”

He reached inside and pulled out a white sheet of paper. “Look, Tal, there’s a note...”

“Really? Read it to me...”

He exhaled heavily, unfolded the paper and cleared his throat. “My sweet Natalie: I love the woman that you’ve grown into. You make your mother and I so proud. May God bless you in your future endeavors, and you know that your family will be here to support you. I wish you and Brandon a lifetime of love and happiness, and to get you started, I’m giving you a little something to help...I hope that you have the wedding of your dreams...Love you always, Granny...”

“It really said that?”

“No, Natalie, I made it up...of course it said that...”

“Well, what’s inside?”

Brandon pulled out a check. Silent once he’d looked at the check, he then handed the check to her, clearing his throat again.

“Bran, what is it?” she asked, taking the check from his hands.

He sucked in his breath as he watched her eyes widen as she looked at it. She then proceeded to cover her mouth with her hand as she sucked in her breath.

“Yea, I know,” he said to her, understanding.

“It has your name on it too,” she replied, showing the check to him.

“I can’t believe it...five thousand dollars?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Wait a minute...”

“What?”

“You sneaky little...”

“What on earth could I have possibly done...?”

“You know what you did,” she whispered to him, reaching out to poke him in the chest. “You always know...”

Of course he did. Which would explain why he smiled so grandly at her at the moment. But she shouldn't have spoken so quickly, right? The night that they scrambled over their finances, trying to find any kind of money to pay for a wedding, he'd felt embarrassed, felt like less of a man, felt his stomach curl at the way she looked at him when he'd told her that he was plumb broke. Not only had he wasted his affections on Sophia, he'd also wasted his money on that silly girl too, with the exception of the money he'd spent on the engagement ring on Natalie's finger. Nonetheless, he was penniless, and he knew that Natalie was disappointed. And he was so paranoid of her disappointment, that he not only thought that she wouldn't marry him, he also went so far as to run to his father and beg him for the money.

The bastard cleared his throat and paused before answering, after he'd poured his heart out, explaining how much Natalie meant to him, and said, “I'm sorry son...but we've given you enough money these past years to last you a lifetime...and after you left graduate school, your mother and I decided to stop giving you money...unfortunately, you proved to us that you cannot manage money very well...we're sorry...I'm sorry...”

He swore that he almost cried then and there, and in the days following, the more he heard Tallie talk about the wedding to him, the more he ached.

And with his pride nowhere in sight, he called Maya, and he asked for her Granny's phone number.

“What for?” she'd asked.

So, he told her. She'd told him that she would help if she could.

He knew that she would. There was always something angelic about those Chandler girls...

His hands were shaking when he called Marie Chandler two weeks before Christmas. His hands were shaking so badly that he could barely breathe and he'd thought of the ways that she'd receive him, considering the fact that he hadn't spoken with her since the cookout back in the summer.

“My boy,” she'd said. “To what do I owe this honor?”

He'd almost changed his mind, just in the moment that he heard her voice. The light and the air of it reminded him of Natalie then. He then pictured Tallie in the white dress of her dreams, surrounded by flowers, her face lit by a smile, walking toward him. He regained his footing.

“I need help, Ms. Chandler...”

“Granny, Boy...call me Granny...and what do you need help with?”

He sighed heavily, cleared his throat and told the grandmother that he only wanted to make Natalie happy, only wanted to give Natalie the world, and that he never wanted to lose her again...

“Alright, Brandon...let Granny handle it...”

So, she did. And now, quicker than he expected, Natalie had discovered their little secret.

“What in the world’s the matter with you?”

He sucked in his breath. “What are you talking about?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

“Brandon...”

“Don’t Brandon me,” he hissed. “You know why I did this...”

“You didn’t have to...you know that...”

He sighed and only looked at her. He wanted to. With everything he had inside of him, he wanted to, damn it. Why couldn’t she understand that? Why in the hell did she have to make everything difficult?

“Tal, I know that...”

She lowered her eyes to the check. “Why didn’t you tell me? We could have figured this out together...if you were in trouble...”

He didn’t respond. He would assume that she knew that he had to redeem himself. Yes, redeem himself for all of the dumb shit he’d done to her, for leaving something that had given his life substance, that had given him something to give a damn about.

She lifted the check back up and waved it back and forth. “Why, baby? Why do you constantly do this?”

“Don’t ask me that,” he told her, shaking his head left to right. “Please, don’t ask me that...”

She looked back down at the check. “You’re amazing...you know that, right?”

No, you are, Tal. For giving him a second chance, for putting up with all of his bullshit all of these years, for loving him in the way that he was certain he didn’t love her.

Merry Christmas...

He hoped that her crazy mother wouldn’t choke him to death the moment that she entered the living room the next morning and saw her daughter laying atop him, with the covers wrapped around them so tightly. Hell, they both couldn’t have helped it. After spending the next two hours talking about everything under the sun, the way that they used to back in college, heavy-lidded Natalie straddled him and placed her head on his chest, and soon after, she was fast asleep. The last thing that he remembered doing was rubbing her head and hearing her breathing, before he, too, fell asleep, counting his blessings in his dreams.

He looked as if he were about to ring her neck the moment that he opened his Christmas present the following morning.

“Tallie...” was all he said, through his sleepy grumble, and she watched as his cheeks slowly turned bright red.

“Do you like it,” she asked, grinning.

“You know I do...”

“And the engraving?”

“Especially that...indulge me, though...”

“I’m not telling you how much it cost...that’s between me and the Lord...”

“And us,” Sidney interjected.

Natalie lowered her eyes and giggled. “And Sid and Maya...”

“I’ll find out sooner or later...”

“I’ll never tell you,” she replied in singsong voice.

“We’ll see about that later,” he told her, winking at her subtly.

She knew that he loved the gift any way, and her only hope was that he took better care of that one than he did the last. And she hoped that he knew that that was going to be his last big gift for a while...

The Chandler women were in complete shock when, after all of the presents had been opened, Brandon pulled out a box from a hidden corner by the fireplace in the living room, with “To Ms. Chandler” written on a Santa-printed label on the front.

Helen Chandler took the present hesitantly, and said, “You really didn’t have to get me anything...”

“I know,” was Brandon’s response, as he rejoined Natalie on the space on the floor beside the sofa.

“Open it, Mama,” Sidney suggested with eagerness and curiosity filling her eyes.

“I wonder what it could be,” Maya said.

So did Natalie. She hoped it weren’t some obscene gesture, telling her mother off. Nevertheless, she would understand.

Her mother hadn’t necessarily been the nicest person the past couple of nights.

Her mother slowly unwrapped the present, pursing her lips as if she were above it all, and when she saw the contents, she gasped.

“It’s rather simple,” Brandon said. “But I thought that you would enjoy it...”

By the look on her mother’s face, she was certain that she did.

Helen held up a black and white picture, framed in black, of her in her early thirties, at the beach with Sidney tugging at her dress, with Natalie sitting in the sand with a bucket hat on her head, and with baby Maya in her arms.

The mother held a hand to her mouth. “I’d forgotten about this day...”

“I stole the picture from Natalie’s apartment,” Brandon explained. “And...and I thought it was great, so I had it blown up and framed...I...I hope you like it, Ms. Chandler...”

Helen didn’t respond quickly, and looked as though she wanted to cry, but she calmed herself and regained her composure. She then cleared her throat, looked at Brandon, placed a hand to her chest and managed the first smile that Natalie had seen in days.

“Thank you,” Helen said quietly. “Um, Brandon...thank you, Brandon...”

Chapter 20

THE GREEN HILL SHOWER





Ms. Helen Chandler
Invites you to join her
In the celebration of love
As her daughter, *Natalie Savannah*
Is united in marriage to *Brandon David Greene*
Son of Jackson and Martha Greene
On Saturday, the fifteenth of August
Two thousand and six
At three o' clock in the afternoon
Bingham Park



SHE
STOOD
in the mir-
ror and
ran her
hands up
and down
the fabric,
sucking in
her breath
each time
that she
pictured

being at that wedding, dancing around, hugging her relatives and meeting her new ones. It was visual confection: pure snow-white, several yards of lace and tulle, draping through the midriff of the strapless, A-line gown. It was beaded with diamantes and bugles and shimmered and twinkled in all the right places, and she couldn't believe that the price had been so reasonable, that she could still afford the food from the catering company and the roses from the flower company and the lacy veil that her mother insisted that she wear.

It was the dress, as soon as she'd laid her eyes upon it, in Alice's Boutique in Madison, and as soon as she'd tried it on,

letting the soft fabric caress her skin, she couldn't think of another one that she wanted more, and all of her wants and worries and needs that were so closely aligned with that darn wedding, immediately subsided.

It was late May when she shelled out the five hundred dollars for the dress and the one hundred and fifty for the veil, and Natalie became antsy, believing that she hadn't completed all of the things that she needed to, believing that she wouldn't be able to get the invitations out in time, believed that any second, with all the nonsense she fed to Brandon on a regular basis about buying the right tuxedo and making sure he kept up with his ring and telling him what his best man's duties were, that he would walk away from it all and from her and say to hell with it! But, she'd take a deep breath each time he called her and told her that he'd completed another task, restoring her confidence and encouraging her to keep planning.

And as each day drew nearer, she almost believed that she'd walk away from it all as well.

On occasion she'd sit back and tell herself that it was only a wedding, and the thing that she should really be celebrating is a life with Brandon instead of turning into this over analytical, organizationally-crazed maniac, who wanted every aspect of the event to be perfect, and go just as she'd imagined in her head, when she was a little girl, and Jamal Lennox from next door was her groom, and Maya and Sidney were her bridesmaids, and weeds from her grandmother's backyard were her bouquet, and she was flying to Tahiti for her honeymoon the

next day. Her only wish was that someone would smack some sense into her and the entire situation before she lost it completely, before she annoyed Brandon to the point that he no longer wanted her or that wedding.

Brandon finally moved out of the house on Trent Road at the beginning of June, after spending nearly six years of his young life there, his second year living there being the same year (and the same semester) that he met Natalie for the first time. Scotty, who'd secured a job as a rush hour radio personality at one of the stations in Athens, would stay there until he could find a better place, one where he could live by himself. The house lost its luster the moment that all Brandon's stuff was out of it.

Brandon put the majority of his things in storage in a place just outside of Atlanta, near Natalie's family's home in Decatur, where he would later pick them up and they would make the move to North Carolina.

Yes, North Carolina, where Natalie would start her med classes at Duke, and where Brandon had secured a job, despite his grad school dropout guise, at a small marketing firm just outside of Research Triangle Park in Raleigh as an Associate Market Researcher, which he deemed a big step up from being a very low paid internship at a firm in Athens.

And a couple of weeks following Brandon's big move out, Natalie moved out of her apartment, which, to her, seemed less significant, despite the fact that it was the holding place of all of her and Asha's inside jokes, and laughs, and small, trivial

fights that they forgot about five minutes later. It was the holding place of talks of boys, of television-watching marathons, of Asha consoling her after she'd shed gallons of tears over Brandon's insolence. So, maybe it was more significant than she originally thought, and in a few months she would be living with a man instead of Asha, who was the biggest neat freak she'd ever met.

She, too, placed her things in the same storage place as Brandon, and while Brandon returned to his home up north, Natalie quit her job at the hospital (which she should have done the moment that she left Anthony!) and moved into her comfortable home in the south with her mother, who was more at peace with life than she'd ever seen her.

Yes, in mid-June, Natalie took her mother by the hand, and walked around the neighborhood with her mother at dusk, the breeze, cooling the sweat at her skin.

They'd walked in silence for several minutes, taking in the sight of the old neighborhood, of the lone drone of the airplane above their heads, the shadows of long branches invading the color of the fading asphalt of Green Hill, of bouncing magnolia blossoms...

Then, her mother said, "I...I...I like Brandon..."

Natalie couldn't help but smile then, recalling the last time Brandon came home and spent time with her family. It was Easter, and he'd helped lay out the plastic eggs in the yard beside the church for the kids after the service, and at Granny

Marie's, he'd offered to help assemble the deviled eggs, put the vanilla wafers in the banana pudding, wipe off Alicia Chandler's scrape after she fell on the sidewalk, and wipe the tears from her eyes. Natalie herself had a hard time believing how interactive he'd been, how funny he'd been, how comfortable he'd looked, sitting in the shade in a rusty lawn chair with her uncles, drinking from Milwaukee beer cans.

It was almost as if God wanted everyone to know how perfect he was, how much she loved and deserved him, and especially, how wrong Helen Chandler had been.

"I'm so glad that you do," Natalie said quietly, her voice floating with the draft.

Helen looked at her. "And you're different too, young lady?"

"Am I?"

"Lord, yes! You're so grown up...so...so..."

"Happy?"

"Yes, baby," Helen sighed, squeezing her hand tighter. "You seem so happy..."

"That's because I am," Natalie said. "I'm happy because I'm getting married...I'm happy because you like him...you finally like him..."

"Well, don't get too excited," Helen said. "My good feelings for him may go any second..."

"Mama..." Natalie rolled her eyes.

"I'm just telling you, Nattie," Helen said. "One little slip up and..."

"Mama, just admit that he's a good guy and leave it at that..."

After the walk, they returned to the house, and she sat on the porch swing, as they'd done a year prior. Helen Chandler wrapped an arm around her daughter and sighed. Natalie's head found a home in her mother's bosom.

"I only want the best for you," her mother said quietly.

"I know, Ma," Natalie replied, watching the branches of the magnolias in her front yard sway. "I know you do..."

"And if marriage is the right thing...well..."

The more Natalie thought about it, it was. After Brandon moved out of his house at the beginning of the month, he'd gone back to his parents' house in Saratoga until the wedding in August, and as much as she hated admitting it to herself, she didn't like the fact that he was outside of Georgia, and she wasn't with him. This was how she knew that she was ready to live with Brandon, ready to be with him all of the time; the phone conversations were simply not enough. She wanted him there, with her, all of the time, the way they used to be together before things got so complicated. Part of her wanted to get back to seeing him rummage through her refrigerator and cabinets, scratching his belly and making a weird groaning noise while he looked for food. She'd missed fetching him in the middle of the night during one of his bouts of sleepwalking, missed attempting to push him off of her. She missed complaining about the messiness of his room or when he bit his nails, or when she got so mad at him that she simply wanted to

scream. Yes, marriage was appropriate...marriage was what she wanted...marriage was the best thing for her...

But, how to explain that to her mother? A mother, who, despite saying that she now appreciated the Caucasian fiancé, still had her reservations about the whole thing. How could she convince her mother that a life with Brandon was all she ever needed at this point in time?

Waiting it out seemed the best medicine for this occasion. By doing that, she could avoid the stress and avoid another endless conversation about why Brandon was so important. After all the wedding was a little over a month away, and for once she would allow herself to steer clear of her mother's opposition, and focus on her feelings for once...focus on the fact that in a matter of days, she was about to give up her life for another.

Knowing that she wouldn't see Brandon till the wedding was hard for some reasons, and easy for others. She didn't have the luxury of falling asleep on his chest while they watched television, or the luxury of going out to dinner with him, and sharing laugh after laugh, or someone to share a Sunday afternoon with beneath swaying trees, watching the clouds move. Moreover, he was out of reach when she wanted to hit him for not following through on a plan she'd designated for him to take care of. Contrarily, she could focus less on their relationship and more on the wedding, which, by the beginning of July, was coming full-circle. Maya decided to put her Savannah College of Art and Design education to good use and elected herself to

be the photographer for the wedding. Natalie hoped that she wouldn't crack under the pressure of being both the photographer and the maid of honor.

"Don't worry, Nat," Maya assured her. "How hard can the job be?"

Brandon elected Scotty to be the disc jockey at the wedding reception. With a little persuasion, Scotty finally agreed, saying, "I must love really love you guys...because I never work for free..."

Granny Marie let Natalie scour her rose garden for the floral arrangement that would not only line each row of chairs at the ceremony, but would also be a part of the bouquet (that Maya had also elected to assemble) and the centerpieces at each of the fifteen tables at the reception. According to Granny, the yellow roses with the pink tips meant friendship and falling in love, and the soft pink roses symbolized grace. Natalie smiled at her selection; a little representation on her wedding day never hurt anyone.

Joanna had designed the cake by the start of summer: a three-tiered white cake with butter cream frosting and raspberry filling, embedded with the same grandiflora roses and streams of thin champagne-colored ribbons, cascading down on each side. Natalie worried slightly. How could the cake be transferred from New York to Georgia, in the dead of one of the hottest summers in some time, without crumbling into pieces?

“Don’t worry,” Jo assured her, chuckling with air. “I’ve got it all under control.”

Don’t worry, seemed to be the operative phrase that everyone used with her. Especially on the weekend after the fourth of July, when Scotty and Asha drove from Athens to help her assemble two hundred or so tea-length, three-fold wedding programs that Maya had designed and had printed a few weeks earlier.

When Natalie inquired about the tuxedo order that Scotty was supposed to check on a couple of weeks prior, Scotty proudly said, “Don’t worry, Nat...”

When she asked him about the music he’d selected for the reception, he cleared his throat and said, “Nattie, don’t worry...Maya and I have been in cahoots with each other...we’ve got it all under control, my darlin’...”

“And it’ll be tasteful?” Natalie asked, raising an eyebrow in both his and her sister’s direction.

“Yes,” they both said collectively.

“You might want to give that music play-list a once-over,” Asha advised, placing her hand on Natalie’s wrist. “You know how Scotty is...”

“Exactly how am I, Asha?”

“Oh,” Asha began, with a sigh. “Don’t get me started...”

Scotty rolled his eyes in her direction, looked at Natalie with reassuring eyes and said, “Nat, don’t worry...I’ve selected sentimental, tasteful music that you, Brandon and your families will enjoy...”

“Thank you, Scotty,” Natalie smiled, breathing easily.

“You’re welcome,” Scotty replied. “Besides, Asha’s just upset that you didn’t give her any responsibility...so she went and planned a bridal shower behind your back...”

“Scotty!” Asha hollered, slapping him on the arm. “She wasn’t supposed to know!”

“Of course I’m supposed to know! Ash, what did I say? Brandon and I weren’t going to do the cheesy pre-wedding crap...”

“So, that means the bachelorette party’s out then?” Maya asked.

“Maya, you can still have your bachelorette party,” Natalie said. “But I do remember saying, Asha Rosalie Castile, that I didn’t want a bridal shower...”

“I know you did, Natalie, but I just thought that it would be a good way for us to come together before the wedding...you know, get to know the Greenes a little better...”

“Ash, what do you mean by...Greenes?”

“Nattie, Asha might have invited Brandon’s mother,” Sidney said subtly.

“Great, this might be the worst day ever!”

“Oh, don’t be so overdramatic, Natalie,” Maya said. “It’s not the worst day...your wedding is, like, three weeks away... it’s about time that you see your future mother-in-law again... it’s about time that we meet her...”

“I agree...” Sidney said.

“And I’m going to have to be the one who has to break the news to our mother, right?”

“All taken care of,” Maya said. “Both Mama and Granny have agreed to provide food...”

“And the backyard...”

“What? It’s here? Ash, I could kill you!”

“Nat, just relax,” Asha said. “We’ll all be there...and it won’t be as bad as you’re making it out to be...”

“Yea, Natalie,” Maya said. “Don’t worry...”

She’d brought Jack with her the morning of the shower. She looked the part of everything that represented summer: long linen pants, a flowery chiffon top, and wisps of white wavy hair, falling into her face. Her blue eyes seemed to pierce her with the same magnitude as did Brandon’s, and Natalie swallowed hard the moment she walked toward the lofty couple at the gate of the airport in Atlanta, waving her hand nervously from side to side. Scotty had come down from Athens with Asha again that weekend, and seemed the good source of moral support when Brandon wasn’t around. He stood beside her in that chilly airport with his arm around her, squeezing and rubbing, silently coaching her to breathe, while the girls remained in Decatur, amongst the backyard of the Green Hill house, setting up chairs and the table for the food and the music. Part of her wished that his parents had brought their son along, missing his touches and his kisses more and more each

day. Yet, she understood. Just the night before, while she talked to him on the phone just before bed, he’d told her that he wouldn’t come down there. He was confident that she’d handle the situation with grace and ease without him. She hoped so. In the meantime, she would attempt to silence her heart pounding.

Mark and Joanna appeared at the opening of the gate moments later, Jo still remaining one of most beautiful women that Natalie had ever seen. The Greene foursome approached them, Joanna, extending her arms wide in her direction.

“Oh, little Tallie Chandler!” she’d said. For some reason, after hearing it from Brandon so many times perhaps, both Joanna and Mark had gotten in the habit of calling her that whenever they spoke. She liked it.

“Oh, Natalie, you glow!”

She hoped so. As soon as she’d heard about the bridal shower and seeing the Greens again, she ran to the mall, and bought one of the most expensive sundresses; a coral shade, strapless and cinched at the breasts, falling freely at her hips, giving the illusion that she had curves. It was her favorite dress, aside from the one that she would be wearing quite soon.

She’d hugged Mark, who, with his hair slightly longer than when she last saw him, made him look more like Brandon, making her heart do a subtle flip.

Jack was warm, smiled grandly, and his enthusiasm made the situation a lot easier for her to handle.

Martha was polite, but she still carried the air that had intimidated Natalie from the start. She extended her graceful hand in Natalie's direction and said, "Good to see you again, Natalie." She then looked at Scotty and said, "Good to see you again too, Mr. Kelly."

"The pleasures all mine," Scotty said.

Scotty had met Brandon's parents way back in the winter of 1999, during their sophomore year, the same semester that they moved into the house on Trent Road, when Brandon invited his housemates to his parents' ski lodge in Brantling for the New Years' Eve celebration. From then on, Scotty rather became the Greenses' honorary son, spending a few more holidays in the north with them.

Natalie hoped that if the Greenses enjoyed Scotty's company, then they could enjoy hers.

Scotty helped retrieve their bags from baggage claim, and shortly following, they were in route to a hotel in midtown, where the parents and son and wife dropped off their belongings.

While Natalie nervously drove from midtown to her humble abode, with Mark and Joanna trailing behind in a cab, she fumbled through her story of her family, and how her mother came to reside in Decatur. She mumbled through the account of her mother, her grandmother and her five brothers and sisters' move from the swamps of Savannah to the bustling life of Decatur, after her grandfather Joseph Chandler died. Marie Chandler created a life for herself and her six children the best

way she knew how in the brick house on Hargrove Street. Helen Chandler, the fourth child of the sixth, met handsome Dominican-born Raphael Santos when she worked at Harold's grocery at the end of Jones Street. It wasn't long before they moved in together, got married and had Sidney Gabriela...and so on and so forth...

Jack Greene seemed genuinely interested. Martha Greene, contrarily, stared out of her window, appeared stifled in her black, Camry. She said nothing, and made no noise, with the exception of a few snuffles and throat clearing. Natalie could see Jack look at his wife through her rearview mirror.

"My family's really anxious to meet you," Natalie admitted. "No one down here really knows anyone from New York..."

Natalie realized that she sounded so simple, so unsophisticated that it made her insides twitch.

"Oh, we're not that different," Jack Greene said casually. "As you've noticed with Brandon..."

Natalie disagreed. Brandon was nothing like his parents. He belonged to a region of his own—where white men infused with implausible soul loitered...

Natalie reached the house on Green Hill and her heart pounded. She entered through the front door, called her mother's name, and shortly following Helen Chandler appeared in the small foyer.

Her mother wiped the flour onto the apron tied around her waist, and extended her hand. "Hello, Helen...Helen Chandler..."

Natalie couldn't believe how cordial her mother was being. She even questioned whether or not her mother had had anything to drink before they arrived. Maybe she didn't need Brandon to be there after all...

Martha Greene stood frozen looked down at her mother's hand with superiority in her eyes and bit her lip back. Jack Greene stepped forward.

"Hello," Jack Greene said, shaking Helen Chandler's hand. "Jackson Greene...I'm Brandon's father...most people just call me Jack..."

"Nice to meet you," Helen said. "I can see where your son gets his looks from...a spittin' image..."

"Well, thank you," Jack Greene grinned.

Helen then looked at Martha...silence.

It seemed as if they were studying each other, waiting for the other one to flinch, move at least an inch, blink...

Here was the mother of the young man who stole her daughter's heart. What kind of woman was she? What kind of household did she run? She had her son's zealous gaze...

"Helen Chandler," her mother spoke, extending her hand. "You must be Martha..."

"And," Martha Greene began, touching Helen's hand. "You must be Helen...Natalie speaks very highly of you..."

Mama served sweet tea in the tent that the bridesmaids set up all by themselves. Granny Marie showed the Greens to their respective lawn chairs, beneath shade.

Natalie managed to excuse herself to the kitchen inside. Scotty and her bridesmaids followed suit.

As Natalie reached into the refrigerator for the banana pudding, Asha folded her arms and asked, "So? How did it go?"

"Was she just a complete bitch?" Maya asked.

"I bet she was," Sidney speculated.

Natalie placed the dish on the kitchen counter, sighed and said, "I don't know what just happened...but it's over with...we can move on..."

"She looks like a complete bitch," Maya said. "How dare she try to run you off?"

"Mama should poison her food..."

"Let's not be too hasty," Scotty said, raising his hands.

"Of course you would say that," Asha said, glaring at her friend.

"What do you mean by that?" Scotty asked, crossing his arms.

"Don't start it, you two," Natalie warned. "Please, don't make me have to call Brandon..."

Silence fell between them. Natalie chuckled to herself. "That's better," she said.

"Mama made fried chicken," Maya began, reaching in the cabinets for plates. "Is she too snooty for that?"

“She’ll eat what your mother gives her,” Asha said. “How dare she?”

“That’s right,” Sidney said. “She didn’t have to cook all of that food...”

They fell silent, and stared through the kitchen window, where they each had a clear view of the tent and its occupants.

“Look at her, sitting all cross-legged, chin all high,” Sidney said.

“Snooty bitch...” Maya said.

“If Mama heard you cursing like that, she’d kill you,” Natalie said, staring at her younger sister. “So, stop it...”

“Nat, I can’t believe you’re so calm about all of this,” Asha observed. “Why are you so calm about this?”

If they only knew...if they only knew that at any second she felt as if her stomach would shoot through her mouth...

“You’ve prepared a sensational meal, Helen,” Jack Greene said, glancing down at his plate of fried chicken, potato salad and green beans. “It looks great...this is the best bridal shower that I’ve ever been to...”

“This is the only bridal shower you’ve been to, Mr. Greene,” Jo said, smiling. “I don’t remember you being at mine...”

“Nevertheless, the food is excellent...”

“Thank you, Mr. Greene,” Helen said. She then looked at Martha while the others started their meals. “Mrs. Greene...

will you please try my potato salad...it’s taken me over ten years to perfect the recipe...”

Natalie sat with her bridesmaids and her fiancé’s best man, and they watched breathlessly. Martha Greene winced a smile, glancing over at the serving dish of potatoes, and eggs, and an assortment of other things.

“I’m sure it’s wonderful,” the woman said, re-crossing her legs.

“It is,” Granny Marie said. “My daughter is an excellent cook...”

“I’m sure she is,” Martha Greene said, chuckling nervously.

Helen Chandler rolled in her lips. “You haven’t touched your fried chicken, Mrs. Greene...”

“It’s really excellent, Mrs. Greene,” Natalie encouraged, breaking off a piece and placing it into her mouth.

“Have you ever eaten fried chicken before, Mrs. Greene?” Helen asked, arching her right eyebrow.

“It’s been many years, Ms. Chandler,” Martha responded. “Many years...”

“I’m placing you with a good opportunity to start again, Mrs. Greene...”

“I’m not really hungry right now, Ms. Chandler...”

“I see,” Helen said. “Perhaps, I’ll wrap it up for you and you can take it back to your hotel room and you can eat it later?”

“Yes...perhaps...”

Helen turned her attention to Mark and Jo. "You're a lovely couple..."

"Thank you," Jo answered cheerfully.

"How long have you two been married?"

"Four years," Mark replied, swallowing content of food in his mouth.

"Natalie tells me that you have a baby girl," Helen said.

Jo nodded. "Yes, ma'am...Julie Ann...she's three...Natalie will be an aunt soon..."

"Isn't that exciting?"

Natalie felt slightly unhinged by the subtle tone of mockery in her mother's voice.

Mark and Jo both nodded.

"And you'll be baking my daughter's cake for her wedding? Joanna, is it?"

"Most people just call me, Jo," Jo Greene said. "But, yes, Natalie asked me to do it..."

"And you're also her bridesmaid?"

"Yes..."

"It's going to be a tough job, isn't it?"

"I can manage..."

"You're a spittin' image of Brandon," Granny Marie said, cheekily, glancing at Mark, who now wiped the corners of his mouth. "You two could pass for twins..."

"We get that a lot," Mark replied, turning flush.

"Speaking of which," Helen Chandler said with a sigh. "Where is that wonderful son of yours? He and Natalie are usually attached at the hip..."

"He wanted a little peace and quiet before he came down here for the wedding," Jack Greene said, shoving a spoonful of potato salad in his mouth. "Apparently, Natalie's been driving our son a little zany with all of the wedding stuff..."

Natalie sensed that Jack had meant this statement as a joke, but she watched her mother's face sour.

"A little zany? She's simply planning the wedding of her dreams...can he not be civil with that?"

Natalie made a desperate attempt to speak before Jack could part his lips.

"Mama," she began. "Brandon and I just needed some time apart...he's been stuck in Georgia for years...he needed a change of scenery...there's no reason to be alarmed..."

Helen didn't respond.

"Your daughters are lovely, Helen," Jack Greene said, nodding in the direction of the three Chandler sisters, who sat side by side.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Greene," Helen Chandler replied. "They're the light of my life..."

"Is their father around here somewhere?" Martha Greene asked.

Silence fell over them; all that could be heard was the hush of the wind around them. Natalie was pressed to wonder why

her fiancé's mother decided to ask that question. She then wondered if Brandon had ever told her about his alcoholism, about his hostility. She sat back quietly, studying her mother's face, awaiting the moment that she would explode.

Helen only sighed. "Their father hasn't been around for many years...I've raised them myself..."

Martha Greene pursed her lips, made an indecipherable noise of dissatisfaction, but ultimately remained silent. She only stared at Helen.

"Nat, why don't you open your presents?" Scotty suggested, breaking the awkward silence. "In the meantime, Maya and I can go into the kitchen and get the dessert...if that's okay with Ms. Chandler..."

Helen Chandler nodded. "It's fine with me, Scotland..."

They watched Maya and Scotty head back into the direction of the house.

Jo got up from her seat next to Mark, and reached for the small stack of brightly colored packages on the table next to the food.

"Here you go, Tallie," she said, placing the packages at her feet.

"Thank you," Natalie replied.

She stared at her presents, and she wasn't really sure why she felt a stint of hesitancy run through her.

"What's the matter, Nattie?" Sidney asked her. "You'll like what we got you..."

"Open your presents, baby," Helen encouraged.

She reached for the first one.

"That one's from me," Asha said, smiling.

She pulled out a series of white pillar candles with Brandon and Natalie's full names, written on the front.

Natalie smiled in Asha's direction. "Thank you, Ash...that is very sweet of you..."

"You're welcome..."

Scotty and Maya returned with yellow cake and banana pudding, placing them on the table next to the food. Natalie then reached for the next present.

"That's from me," Sidney said. Inside was a gift certificate for a couple's spa weekend in Atlanta.

"Thank you, Sid..."

"You're welcome, darlin'..."

Natalie then retrieved an attractive black box, tied with pink ribbon at her feet.

"Um, maybe you should open that one a little bit later," Jo suggested, pursing her lips.

Natalie looked at her. "Why is that?" she asked.

"Just because..."

"I don't know about anyone else," Helen Chandler began.

"But I'm now incredibly curious as to what's in that box...?"

"Me too," Natalie said, glancing down at it. "Why can't I open it?"

Helen Chandler sat up abruptly, extended her hands to her daughter's lap and said, "Here, allow me..."

"Oh...wait..." Jo said, breathlessly, watching as the mother tore off the ribbon and snatched off the black top.

Natalie watched her mama's eyes enlarge. "What kind of freak show is this?"

Helen pulled out a pair of white crotchless panties for everyone to see. Natalie was certain that her heart stopped beating as everyone around them gasped in the heat of the summer afternoon.

"What kind of sick person would give this as a gift? Do you think this is funny?"

Helen only looked at Joanna Greene. Jo, the poor redhead, reached for her husband's hand. "No—uh—no, ma'am...I just thought that..."

"You thought what? You thought you'd bring this filth into our home and expect it to be acceptable?"

"Mama..." Natalie murmured. She then wished that her mama would put the panties down. They were starting to make her sick at the sight of them.

"Natalie Savannah Chandler! What were you thinking, huh? What were you thinking bringing these people into our house?"

"Mama...I..."

"You...you what?"

"Mama, she meant nothing by it," Maya interceded. "It's a normal gift...Natalie's getting married..."

"No, no," Helen said, rocking her pointer finger from side to side. "It's not that simple, my darling...Natalie brought a plague upon this house!"

Natalie couldn't remember the last time that she was this embarrassed.

"It's sick, really," Helen continued. "Bringing these people here. I tried it, didn't I, girl? I tried my darndest. I tried my darndest to please you, my child, didn't I? But this woman brings this filth into the house [her mama held up the crotchless panties]. And this woman [Mama darts her eyes at Martha Greene], this high and mighty woman, this 'Queen of Sheba', comes into my home, visibly insults my cooking and just sits there, likes she better than everyone else..."

"Helen Marie," Granny said. "Calm yourself!"

Helen Chandler ignored her mother.

"How dare you insult my family, my daughter's hospitality with your haughty looks?"

"Mama..." Natalie murmured. Her mother didn't even look in her direction. In the biting summer's heat, the two mothers only stared at each other.

"How dare you talk to me that way?" Martha Greene sniped.

This shocked everyone. Natalie reached for Maya's hand.

Jack Greene attempted to place his hand in his wife's lap. Martha only shoved it aside.

"Why do you pretend like this makes sense? This whole circumstance?" Helen said, dropping the box, panties included

on the grassy patch beneath her feet. I see it in your eyes. You despise my daughter as much as I despise your son!”

Martha Greene noticeably searched for a refutation. But the truth lay in her icy blue eyes. What Helen Chandler claimed was painfully true.

Martha Greene looked at Natalie as the daughter felt nauseous.

“Admit it, Mrs. Greene. Admit it, so we can be rid of you!”

“Mama!” Sidney said.

“Not now, Sidney Gabriela...admit it, Mrs. Greene...”

Natalie glanced at Asha and Scotty, who now held hands. Natalie covertly mouthed Sorry and turned back to her mother, who now had beads of sweat forming at her forehead.

“Mama, quit it now,” Maya said. “It was just a pair of drawers...”

Helen only shook her head. They all knew that it was bigger than a pair of underwear.

“I’d been waiting to meet you, you know,” Helen muttered, narrowing her eyes at the woman. “I pictured you in my mind...a sun-thirsty, pale, dried up old woman, who wanted nothing more than to make my daughter feel inferior...”

Natalie longed for Brandon then.

“And your treatment of my son was any better, Ms. Chandler?” Martha spoke softly. “Making him spend Christmas away from his family in this godforsaken domicile? You talked to him as if he were miniscule, inferior, as you said it.”

“What about the money that you offered Brandon if he dumped Natalie?” Asha said finally.

“Asha...” Natalie said.

“Oh, grow some balls, Natalie,” Asha snapped, rolling her eyes. “This woman had Natalie all over Saratoga! Brandon spent the entire day looking for her!”

“Is this true, Nattie?” Helen asked.

Natalie nodded slowly.

“My son’s lives are the most important thing to me,” Martha Greene said. “And how they conduct them is more significant. If you’d enjoy my honest opinion, Ms. Chandler, your daughter didn’t fit into the mold of what I’d envisioned for Brandon’s life.”

“Speak layman’s terms you pasty, old bat! She’s black. What else is there to say? I can agree with you, though, Mrs. Greene. Your overgrown son didn’t fit into the mold of what I’d envisioned for my daughter. We don’t necessarily attach to spineless crackers with flat behinds.”

“That’s quite peculiar,” Martha Greene began, attempting a sarcastic smile. “Because we typically don’t adhere to underprivileged crows...”

Natalie was certain that she’d lost enough oxygen in her brain to kill her. Her vision became fuzzy, and the last thing she could remember seeing was the outline of Asha’s body, leaping out of her chair and lunging outward. A series of howls and screams followed as Natalie slumped out of her chair and onto the floor.

“Natalie...Natalie, wake up...Natalie...”

She hesitated to open her eyes. She wasn't sure she could handle what would happen if she opened them. She wanted to convince herself that it had all been a nightmare, her worst fears of Martha Greene and her mama meeting, manifesting themselves in her subconscious.

Three heads loomed above her in muddled light.

“She's opening her eyes,” a male voice said.

“I can see that you idiot,” a female voice said.

“Baby, open your eyes.” She recognized this voice as Maya's instantly.

“It's us,” she said, stroking her forehead.

Maybe she'd had that nightmare after all...

“What time is it?” Natalie muttered through a scratchy voice.

“It's seven,” Scotty answered.

“Where's Mama...and where's...?”

“Gone, baby,” Maya said sullenly. “Granny took Mama for a drive...and...the Greens...the Greens are at the airport...they're taking the first flight back...”

She couldn't believe it. It had been true!

“What...what happened?”

Maya huffed. “Mama kicked all of them out, saying that she 'didn't ever want to see their honky asses again'...”

“She said that?”

Maya nodded. “It was terrible...”

“Where's Sidney?”

“Getting you some water.”

“Nat,” Asha began quietly, placing a hand to her friend's cheek. “It's over...”

“What's over? What are you talking about?”

“They're...they're not coming...”

Natalie felt a lump rise in her throat as she sat up hastily.

“Who's not coming, Asha? Speak plainly!”

“Nat, calm down,” Scotty coached, attempting to lay her back down. Natalie only shoved him off.

“His parents,” Asha mumbled. “And your mother...”

She didn't want to tell him, but she felt she had to. She was expecting the worse outcome as she dialed his number that night, just before bed. She was expecting him to call the whole thing off. She would hold back her tears as much as she could, but she couldn't promise herself much.

“Hello?”

“It's me...”

“I know that,” he chuckled. “How was the party? Oh, before I forget...I made the dinner reservations at the Bee's Knees for the rehearsal like you told me to...oh, and the sleeves on my tux are a little short, so I'm going to have to take it back to the tailor and see about it. Did you check on the reservation for the honeymoon? I'm not supposed to tell you, but

Jo said the cake design is fantastic and you'll just die when you see it...oh and—“

“Brandon...” she said, stopping him from going any further. Hearing all the plans that she'd organized only made telling him feel even worse.

“What? What's the matter?”

“Our parents aren't coming to our wedding...”

She thought she'd simply get the news telling over with and let him mull over it. After a few drawn out moments of pure silence, Natalie huffed and said, “Talk to them...ask them what happened...if you decide to marry me, I'll be waiting at the county clerk's office in Augusta in a couple of weeks. Then we'll sign our license, and forget about them...if you don't show, then I'll know...”

And she hung up the phone.

They were to meet with the justice of the peace at three on August 10th. She stood on the steps, beneath a stifling Georgian sun in the prettiest sundress she could find in her closet, checking her watch insistently.

It was two-fifty, and her fiancé was scarily nowhere in sight. She'd been dreading this moment for days. She hadn't seen Brandon in over a month, and just when she thought that everything would work out in her favor, her crazed mother and his crazed mother had bumped heads in what could only be marked as the worst bridal shower in wedding history. She hadn't talked to him since she delivered the bad news, making

her worry more. Her bad habit of pessimism pressed her to think the worst about her baby. After all, could she expect more from someone who had a history of running away when things got tough? As two-fifty-five approached, she glanced at her engagement ring, the one that caused their break-up and their miraculous (god-sent, rather!) reunion, and sighed. She knew then that she'd really wanted to marry him, and she regretted not stopping the fight between the mothers before it got too bad. But, could anyone blame her for the fact that she was in shock? They'd talked about her as if she wasn't there, as if she were as invisible as the branches on the trees above them, or the vanilla wafer in the banana pudding.

At three, she dropped her hands and glanced out toward the street. She refused to be angry with him. She would only humbly accept her defeat.

Two minutes later, she ambled down the stairs pitifully, her head sunk low.

And at three minutes...

“Where on earth are you going? We're late, you know...”

She turned and stared at him. He looked so beautiful, didn't he? She ran to him. She leapt into his arms. She didn't care who saw. She kissed his face with such might, that she was convinced she'd bruise him.

Brandon Greene lowered her to her feet and cupped her face.

“You think one little fight between two bitter old women is going to stop me?”

She smiled. “I wasn’t sure...”

“Then you don’t really know me...”

She leaned up to kiss him. He pinched the silky fabric of her dress between his fingers.

And she nodded slowly. “Yes, I do...”

Chapter 21

TO THE MOON
& BACK



SHE AND HER BRIDESMAIDS had gone to a wedding dress shop in Athens just days before the wedding, to try on wedding dresses for kicks even though she'd picked out a dress weeks prior. Heck, it was only two days left till the wedding, and she figured that she and the girls should act a little zany. Lord, she only planned to get married once, right? They'd tried on big, puffy gowns, channeling Cinderella and Princess Diana, pretending as if they were walking down the aisle, humming the "Wedding March" and "Pachelbel Cannon", neither of which Natalie had chosen to use for the moment when she walked down the aisle. She opted for something a little bit more soothing, like "Ave Maria", something that wasn't annoyingly overplayed, and tasteful, and she couldn't believe her luck when she found out from Jo that Chloe Greene played the guitar and was more than willing to play for her processional. She later got the idea to ask her Aunt Miriam, whose voice she'd heard and cherished for years in church, to sing along with the guitar, and her Auntie agreed, immediately looking to the internet to find lyrics to the song.

Natalie tried on the biggest dress yet, and Maya pretended that she was the preacher officiating.

"Do you, Natalie Chandler, take thee, Brandon Greene..."

And Natalie responded with, "I do," and proceeded to twirl around in itchy tulle and crinoline in the process, unfortunately reminding herself that her mother wouldn't be there to watch her marry Brandon.

She let the feeling roll over her for a moment, recalling the day that she stood in her cap and gown the morning of her

high school graduation and as her mother wrapped her brown arms around her slowly, she allowed a tear to run down her cheek and told her softly, "You'll always be my baby girl, and I'll always be here for you, no matter what..."

And where was she now? Probably locked in her house in Decatur, being unnaturally stubborn, while her daughter ached, while her daughter longed for her mother's approval, for her mother's guidance, telling her that this marriage was right, taking pictures left and right, helping her finalize wedding rehearsal dinner plans, making sure her dress fits just right, walking her down the aisle...

It wasn't right, was it? It wasn't right that her mother refused to talk to her, refused to get to know Brandon, refused to come to the wedding...

Wasn't her daughter there for her years back when Papa wasn't? Was she not the daughter that wrapped her arms around her mother consolingly, watching the tears from a broken marriage pour from her soul? Was she not the perfect daughter?

She attempted to push the thoughts out of her mind as she climbed into her trusty black vehicle with her bridesmaids, her family, her circle, her girls, the following afternoon, heading for Augusta, where Brandon and his groomsmen were already stationed, awaiting their arrival.

The rehearsal, at Bingham Park, was scheduled for six, and of course, they would be late. And Brandon knew it,

didn't he? He knew that they would be running late, just as well as he knew her.

That explained why he called her cellular phone while she soared down the 20 at five in the evening, passing through Greensboro, still more than an hour outside of Augusta.

"Yes, baby?" she answered, knowing...

"Where are you?" he asked speculatively, as if he already knew that she was nowhere near him.

"On the 20..."

"On the 20, where...?"

"On the way to Augusta, where else?"

"Natalie Savannah Chandler..."

She heard him make some strange noise of disgust, but she remained silent.

"Nat, if you don't get here by six-thirty, I won't marry you, I swear, I won't..."

"Baby, don't get all huffy..."

"I'm not getting huffy," he said defensively. "I bet you do this to upset me, don't you?"

"Perhaps," she said. "Because it's so easily accomplished."

"What am I supposed to tell your family? And what am I supposed to tell mine? People are already starting to show up..."

"Use that magical power of persuasion that I fell in love with, darlin'..."

"Tallie, don't sweet-talk me right now, I'm mad at you," he told her, sighing.

"I can't wait to see you," she told him. "I feel like it's been ages..."

"Tallie..."

"Brandy..."

"When did you leave Athens?"

"Did I tell you how much I love you lately?"

"Natalie...when did you leave?"

"Well, we stopped to eat, and then Maya had to pee, and then Sid had to pee...and then I was hot so we stopped for water..."

"Oh...my...God...I think I might kill you..."

"I got to run, Bran, I'll see you soon..."

She heard him attempt to say something else, but she hung up the phone before he had a chance...

She and her girls belted out Bel Biv Devoe and the Isley Brothers with the windows rolled down. Yes, Natalie would enjoy this moment, enjoyed the fact that in the morning would be her wedding day, would be the day that she would become Brandon's wife, would be the day that her life would start...

If she could only make it through the night.

She pulled her car into the parking lot of Bingham Park, and was quickly reminded of the moment Brandon did the same a couple of years prior, in his green truck. She wondered then, stepping out onto the asphalt, why he chose this place, what made it so special? It was as if he knew...

It was as if he knew that they'd be here in this same spot together again, exchanging vows, pledging devotion, loving one another...

On the contrary, she couldn't have imagined it...

Ha, she'd come with him to end it, finally, to set her heart free, to rid her mind and every inch of her that he'd possessed, to say goodbye to him, and the memories between them, and the love that they once had...

But, oh, what a trick the Lord played on her!

Here she was, looking at Brandon's green truck nearby in the lot, her wedding dress placed neatly in the trunk, and her girls standing by her, ready to make this wedding a possibility.

She walked down the pathway, her girls in tow, laughing amongst themselves, as she and Brandon had walked before, the late sun, sailing overhead, amid a cloudless sky, and a stale breeze. She walked the pathway, covered overhead by fencing green trees, till she found Brandon, standing next to Mark, talking to Pastor Joins, a tall, dark-skinned something with salt and pepper hair and a wide grin, chuckling a little, while the rest of the groomsmen sat in the first row of white chairs.

She felt guilty. Because she knew that Brandon and the other guys had been setting chairs up all day, had gone back and forth from the reception site to make sure that it looked okay, and had made calls to make sure that all the plans were finalized, all the while attempting to hide the fact that he was angry that both his parents had decided not to come.

No, that emotion didn't show up on his face. He seemed at peace for once; despite how he was a week prior when he'd delivered the news to her, his voice cracking, trying to fight back tears. Looking at Brandon made the wedding all the more real, made her appreciate him even more, his strength, something that she would value truly for the rest of her life.

The white chairs, set in twelve neatly placed rows of twelve on each side, was just the moderately small wedding she'd envisioned, complete with the pink and yellow tea roses that she'd picked out, attached to the end of each row in the center and on the outside. And the long, white satin runner, creating the aisle, lead straight toward the perfect little trellis, wrapped in a bevy of roses.

And Natalie Chandler gasped, took in the sight, lost her breath, and reached for Maya's hand and Asha's hand in an attempt to brace herself.

"Oh, Natalie," Maya breathed. "It looks wonderful..."

Natalie nodded.

"Nat, you're really getting married..."

"Don't say it," she told her friend, focusing on Brandon.

"It may be a dream..."

"No, it's not," Maya said, nudging her sister. "This is really, really happening..."

Yes, it was. And Brandon looked amazing, didn't he? And did it take much for him to be so? He just was. And he was about to be hers, right? Hers for as long as her heart would allow, right? Forever, yes? Forever...

He spotted her, and motioned for her to come near. And she did, her brown companions in tow, and she hugged him tightly when she came to him, took him in and smiled, missed him, genuinely missed him, wanted to thank him for taking things over, for taking the initiative, for being so strong...

"Natalie Savannah," Pastor Joins said, taking her hands and pulling her toward him. "You get prettier each time I see you, Dear Child..."

"Thank you, Pastor," she told him in her sweetest tone, feeling her cheeks warm.

"I've just been talking to Brandon here, and he tells me that you've both agreed to do the traditional Baptist vows?"

Natalie looked up at Brandon.

"Yes," she replied.

Her heart stammered, running the vows through her head, thinking of how they would sound coming out of her mouth.

"And will anyone be walking with you down the aisle?"

Natalie swallowed hard, and Brandon grabbed her hand instantly, knowing...

Natalie shook her head slowly, deterred her eyes and whispered, "No...no...it's just me..."

"Very well then," Pastor Joins said, clapping his hands together. "Shall we get started?"

Natalie and Brandon both nodded compliantly, and as the pastor gathered everyone together, attempting to get some sort of order, Brandon pulled her aside and whispered, "You're doing fine, baby..."

"So are you," she whispered back, kissing the bridge of his nose.

"Thank you..."

Natalie assembled her bridal party the way she wanted, placing Maya first in line, then Sidney, Asha next and Jo last. Then Brandon followed, placing Scotty first, then Mark, then Matthew, then John.

They then practiced the procession, with Chloe sitting in a chair near the altar, pretending to play her guitar, with Aunt Miri mumbling the lyrics, with Brandon standing at the altar, hands clasped behind his back, with Scotty walking Maya, practicing the slow pace as Natalie had instructed, "Left, together, right, together...Maya, stop foolin' around or I'll hit you!" their arms clasped together with Mark walking Sidney, Matthew walking Asha, and John walking Jo, together, walking slower than Natalie would have wanted.

"Ash, could you pick up the pace a little?" Natalie suggested.

"What? It's not me, it's him," Asha snorted, shoving Matthew a little.

"Please, clearly it's her," Matt retorted. "Apparently she didn't get the memo that you don't wear heels in grass..."

"Natalie, I refuse to walk with him," Asha said. "Please, let me walk with Scotty..."

"No way," Scotty said. "I'm stickin' with Maya...she doesn't talk as much as you do..."

“Asha, try remembering whose day it’s suppose to be,” Maya reminded her. “Brandon and Natalie’s...that goes for Matthew too...”

Matt Greene snorted. Brandon Greene said, “Thank you, Maya...Ash, you’ll walk with Matt and you’ll like it...it’s only for a few minutes...I’m sure you can handle a few minutes...”

Asha nodded slowly. “Sorry, Brandon...”

“No problem,” Brandon said with a sigh. “Can we try this again? I’m starving...”

Brandon took his place again at the altar, by the pastor, and the bridal party walked down the aisle together again, John bringing up the rear, and once each person had taken their place at the altar, Natalie was cued, and pretended that she was holding her bouquet of flowers ahead of her, staring at Brandon, only Brandon, her heart pounding, the moment, more surreal than anything she’d ever felt before. And Brandon smiled warmly, took a visible deep breath and winked at her.

And she stopped before him, looking into his eyes, fighting the lump in her throat and the wetness that would soon flood her cheeks if she wasn’t careful. She would save the tears for tomorrow; which she was sure would be bountiful.

“I’ll go through the vows with you,” Pastor Joins explained. “Then I’ll go through the rings section, and shortly following, I’ll announce you man and wife...it’s a very simple process if you follow my instructions...and you’ll be married in less than thirty minutes. How does that sound?”

Brandon and Natalie looked at each other and smiled.

“Sounds great,” Brandon said.

They ate dinner at the Bee’s Knees on 10th street, sometime following a glowing red sunset, shared drinks and tapas over a long white-clothed table and warm candlelight, with a sprinkling of Brandon’s close relatives, sitting side by side with Natalie’s.

And then Scotty, who sat in between Asha and Maya, got a hold of his wine glass, raising it in the air, using his fork to clink against the surface.

He then cleared his throat lowly and said; “If I can get your attention for just one moment while you eat...”

The crowd at the table grew silent shortly following and all looked up at him, dressed comfortably and in a rather preppy manner, which pleased Natalie, who couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken off that silly blue trucker hat.

“Good,” Scotty said, once he realized that he’d become the center of attention. “I’ve known Brandon since we were freshmen in college, and we were roommates in Creswell on the seventh floor, and he’d hate the music that I listened to and I’d hate the way he talked. But somewhere in between our walks to the convenience store or playing foosball with the hot girls in the next wing till five in the morning when we knew that we had a test the next day...we grew close...to something like being brothers. And, with this brotherly title, came the special duty of telling him when he was being an ass and telling him which girl would be perfect for him and which one would-

n't...and whichever girl he didn't chose...I got to keep [the dinner guests chuckled softly]. And when Brandon came to me one day our senior year and told me that he'd fallen in love, I thought he'd lost his mind. He told me that he'd met this girl at his twenty-first birthday party, and he'd admitted that she had the softest voice and she had to have been the prettiest girl he'd seen in awhile [Natalie looked at Brandon]. When he said that she was his best friend, I knew he had to have been talking about Natalie. Because no other girl I've seen would put up with him the way that she does [the guests chuckled again]. And I told him to go for it...because she was the perfect girl... because I knew no one else would love him the way that she would...no one else could be better suited for him...so [Scotty raised his glass higher]...here's to my brother and his best friend...thank you for the wonderful example you've set for the rest of us...cheers..."

A series of clinking glasses followed, and Brandon and Natalie both stood up and hugged Scotty.

"I never knew you had all that in you," Natalie whispered to him.

Scotty smiled. "I clean up nicely, don't I?"

Natalie nodded.

Once dessert had been served, Natalie stood up once more and thanked everyone for coming, making sure that she looked at the sprinkling of white faces occupying the table, showing an appreciative smile, as she held onto Brandon's hand.

And once the rehearsal dinner was done, and the two families had dispersed, what was left was the bridal party, standing on the curb outside of the restaurant, that breezy starlit evening.

And Joanna Greene, who'd disappeared into the parking lot with Mark moments before, reappeared with her husband, and a pink paper bag with white handles. Natalie felt her stomach flip, recalling that the last time she'd seen that same bag was at her bridal shower, when all hell broke loose between her mother and Brandon's over a pair of scary open-crotched g-strings.

Jo shoved the bag in her face, and said, "Reach inside for a surprise..."

Natalie shook her head and attempted to push the bag away. "Jo, no, no, not again..."

"Please...it's not as bad as you think it is..."

"Can I honestly take your word on that one after...you know...?"

"Natalie, don't be such a baby," Jo insisted, shrugging off her inhibitions.

"You do realize that Brandon is standing right here, don't you?"

"And I'm waiting to see what's in that bag," he said, attempting to reach for it.

Natalie smacked his hand away, and said, "Down boy... you walk over there while I investigate..."

“Nonsense,” Brandon said. “If there are crotch-less anything in there, I would like to be the first to take a look...”

“You’re not looking at anything,” Natalie said, reaching up to touch his face. “Now, run along...”

She waited till Brandon headed toward the area where the rest of the bridal party was standing. Then she reached out for the bag.

“Good girl,” Jo smiled. “I knew you were curious...”

“Joanna, I swear,” Natalie sighed as she reached into the bag.

Some surprise.

As Natalie had suspected, Joanna had given her a tiara with fake jewels glued on, that spelled out, “Last Night of Freedom”, a black sipper cup in the shape of a penis, and, of course, another pair of open-crotched g-strings.

“Joanna Greene,” Natalie said slowly, feeling her cheeks warm.

“I see that you like my contribution,” she said, smiling.

“You’re crazy, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told,” she replied. “Happy Wedding...”

“I suppose I should say ‘Thank You’,” Natalie grinned, extending one arm to hug her.

“Of course you should,” she sighed. “Those g-strings will be a hit tomorrow night...”

Asha and her two sisters approached them; Maya, throwing her arms around her.

“How’d she like the penis sipper?” Asha asked, laughing teasingly.

“I picked out the black,” Maya bragged.

“Yes, that makes sense, because Brandon’s black,” Sidney snorted sarcastically. “Nattie, baby, I picked out the rather tasteful tiara...”

“That you spent all of two dollars on...” Maya said.

“Oh, but who’s providing all of the singles?”

“Did you say...singles?” Natalie asked.

“Yes,” Brandon interrupted, startling them. “What’s this I hear about...singles?”

“Singles, idiot,” Asha scoffed. “Single men and single women...like us...”

Brandon narrowed his eyes in Asha’s direction, made a strange, noise, and said, “What are you girls trying to do, corrupt my baby?”

“Not necessarily,” Maya said. “We’re trying to open her eyes to a...a...new world...”

Brandon wrapped his arms around Natalie slowly.

“I see,” he said, leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

“Can I tell you lovely ladies, something?”

“Yes,” Asha said, folding her arms. “I’d love to hear it...”

“If I find out that you’ve done anything to her...I will personally kill each and every one of you...especially you, Asha...”

“Me? Why me? I’m not the one who gave her crotch-less panties...”

“You’ve been warned...”

“Oh, Brandon, don’t try to act all innocent,” Maya said.
“Scotty told me all of your plans...”

His plans. He hadn’t even known much about his own plans, until Scotty conveniently decided to tell him on the way to Augusta the day before.

“They’re eighteen,” he’d said. “Real cheap...there’s lots of liquor and a penthouse suite...”

Sure the rest of his buddies were riled up at the thought of it all; Mark and John had a chance to not think about being responsible husbands for one night. It gave them the sweet opportunity to be young again, to feel things that, perhaps, they often didn’t feel for their wives anymore. Young, naked girls were always a good plan.

The feeling was only bittersweet for him. No doubt he hadn’t looked at a breast in quite some time, but he couldn’t help but be far more concerned about the slight tinge of sadness that he saw in Tallie’s eyes after the rehearsal. They stood outside of the Bee’s Knees, about to say goodbye, and when he leaned down to kiss her, he felt her hesitate. He hoped that it was his imagination, and he hoped that she saw his valiant effort to put on a strong face. No part of him ever wanted her to be sad this weekend; no part of him ever wanted her to think that this whole thing was a mistake. He couldn’t reassure her enough that since her twentieth birthday, all he could ever think of was marrying her one day...

They were at the Marriot, on the top floor, and Scotty encouraged him to drink, in the same intensity that he’d encouraged him to drink the night of his twenty-first birthday, six years prior. He ordered him to take this shot, and that one, chug this bottle and the next one, all before Scotty’s g-stringed guests had even gotten there.

He attempted to sneak away into the bathroom one moment. He’d reached into his back pocket, retrieved his cell phone, and attempted to scroll through his contacts...but he couldn’t remember if the letter “N” came before the letter “M” or after the letter “B”...and it would have helped if he could see the names and numbers.

He just wanted to call her, as Scotty and his buddies banged on the bathroom door, as he slumped down against the bathtub’s edge. He just wanted to make sure that she still loved him, and still wanted to marry him.

He just had to find the letter “N”...

He couldn’t remember how Scotty broke into the bathroom, but shortly following, he felt his best man’s hands, and Matthew’s grasping at his arms, attempting to pull him up.

“Come on, brother,” Matthew slurred. “We have someone we’d like you to meet...”

If it were Natalie, then he’d be overjoyed. He’d kiss those brown lips till he turned blue in the face...

But no...he was pushed into one of the armchairs and was quickly introduced to Candy’s breasts, and Lola’s butt in his lap. He pretended to enjoy it for his groomsmen’s sake, pre-

tended that he didn't think about his bride every second, pretended that he wasn't inebriated.

When the stripper twins left, Scotty passed out on the loveseat in the living room, after saying, "I love you, man," countless times, and his brother's followed suit after a failed attempt at slurring their way through marriage advice.

His immediate thought, in the quiet hotel room, was to search for his phone, which got misplaced sometime in between the bathroom hideaway and the stripper attack.

He searched for several minutes, it seemed, tumbling through the suite aimlessly, quitting after he tripped over his own two feet and landed on the floor somewhere near the bedroom.

Her fear followed her to bed that night...or early morning...both seemed completely obsolete at the moment...

She felt guilty that she didn't give Brandon a warmer goodbye earlier that night, and wanted to call him to make sure that everything was okay...

To make sure that they were still okay...

She'd wanted to assure him that they were still making the right decision, though, at the moment that they stood outside the restaurant, her thoughts had become cloudy, and she wasn't sure what she wanted from him. She'd never tell him that though. Nor would she tell her bridesmaids, who'd stayed up with her, mere minutes before the crack of dawn, confess-

ing secrets, laughing, sipping on wine coolers, and listening to music that reminded them of easier times. Like the music her mother used to listen to in the kitchen on Saturdays; old school rhythm and blues that was just as laid back as the rhythm of the wind, sweeping through the trees outside of their window. Yes, back when her mother wasn't so worn, so shattered, so beaten, when she wore her dark hair carelessly and loose, when she gathered her daughters up into her arms and danced with them around the kitchen, when she used to smile, when she encouraged her daughters to pursue any path that life had to offer them...

Why couldn't she understand that Brandon was her path?

Her fear was that life would beat her down as it had done her mother, leaving her with nothing but a bitter taste in her mouth.

She did not want that for her, and she didn't want that for Brandon either...

Yes, she climbed in her bed with her heart beating wildly, and tears rolling softly down her cheek in stark darkness. She closed her eyes with a mind flurried with confusion, with doubt of the day that lay before her, motherless, and feeling without the guidance that she so desired...

When her girls came to wake her in a sunbathed room of a Double Tree, no less than four miles from Bingham park, she sat up slowly, wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. Her girls sat with her on the bed, wrapped their arms around her, and asked, "Are you ready? This is the best day of your life!"

Surely. She couldn't think of anything more that she wanted than to spend her life with Brandon.

Brandon...who teased her constantly about her accent, who squeezed her and tickled her, who made her laugh, who had the most amazing eyes, the most amazing personality, who was a part of her in every way possible.

Maya, a Nikon 35mm between her small hands, stayed by her side, at the salon that early morning, when they got their hair done, when they ate a small lunch at a café in the hotel, when Sidney helped her with her makeup, and when Granny stood before her, handing her a small family heirloom: her great-great-grandmother's diamond bracelet.

"Here you are, my darling grandbaby," Granny Marie said, adjusting the crown of tiny roses in her hair. Granny kissed her cheek thereafter, smiling gently into her face, then disappeared out of the room, to head toward the ceremony site.

Maya captured the moment.

It was two-fifteen that afternoon, the limousine waited patiently for them outside of the lobby, and with the bridesmaids securely dressed in their tea-length, strapless black organdy dresses, that meant that they had just enough time to get Natalie in her wedding dress, and firmly fitted with only moments to spare before the wedding commenced at three. It was a tight schedule, and even when they caught wind that the majority of the wedding guests had arrived and were seated, her girls never lost focus, never lost their heads. Joanna helped pull the

dress up about her curves, Sidney affixed the veil on her crown of roses, and Asha quickly assigned jeweled, white strappy numbers to each foot.

Joanna proceeded to fasten each button, and the faster her bridesmaid progressed up her spine; the less she felt that she could breathe. She quickly recalled her last dress fitting a few days ago, when she and Brandon had headed downtown to sign the wedding license, she then thought about what she'd ate the night before, and the night before that, and as Jo said, "Okay, Natalie, just a few more buttons, you look beautiful," she was sure that her lungs were collapsing. As her sisters shed small tears, and dabbed their eyes with tissues, she fought for breath, allowing soft gasps to escape her dry lips, and she placed a hand to her chest, feeling her heart grip, feeling the temperature rise in her body by the millisecond, feeling her vision blur.

She remembered gasping, "I can't breathe," before her knees buckled. She knelt before her concerned bridesmaids, and she couldn't distinguish the one who went to retrieve a sheet of paper to fan over her face. Joanna was holding her hand, Sidney had a hand on her back, and Asha was fumbling with her cell phone.

"Hey, get over here...yes now...because we need you... hurry, please..."

She hoped that it wasn't Brandon, hoped that he couldn't see the tears that she cried at that moment, ruining her

makeup, while her bridesmaids continuously asked her what's wrong.

What on earth was the matter with her? Why couldn't she straighten up? How dare she let her inner turmoil destroy her this way? Why couldn't she have been confident enough that things would work themselves out? Could she have been more selfish at the moment?

But, oh she sat there in a pitiful state, in her beautiful white gown. And she knew that she couldn't do it.

This day can't happen without her mother...it just can't...

She had to leave...she had to get out of that dress (her favorite dress)...and get away...she would tell Brandon later... she hoped that he understood...

"Natalie, please tell us why you're crying?" Sidney pressed, stroking the length of her back. "Please, so we can help you."

Lord, she was helpless...plumb helpless...

She only shook her head then and stared aimlessly. She couldn't look at them. Part of her felt too ashamed to admit the fact that she was a quitter, that even when she got this close to being completely happy with Brandon she'd blow it...and why?

For a stubborn, lonely black woman, who'd rather sit in her own misery than be there for the daughter she claimed to love so much? Why couldn't she be stronger? Why couldn't she say 'To hell' with her mother!

She couldn't as much as her heart ached then...

"Natalie, sweetheart, what's the matter?" Joanna asked.

"I'm here..."

Natalie looked up and saw Scotland Kelly glaring down at her, completely out of breath, as if he'd used every organ in his body to reach them on time, with his eyes widening at the sight of her. "Oh...God," he'd said.

"I didn't know what else to do," Asha told him, folding her arms. "One minute she was fine and the next..."

"I see," Scotty huffed.

He then proceeded to kneel down beside her, reach for her hand and stroke it gently. She enjoyed the sincerity in his eyes then, as if he looked genuinely concerned, as if time were no measure then.

"Nat, baby..." he sighed.

Natalie only shook her head, and allowed another tear to fall.

"Talk to me," he encouraged, rubbing her hand.

She shook her head again. Scotty sighed with slight exasperation and dropped his head.

"Alright," he said lowly. He then looked at the faces of each of the patient bridesmaids and nodded once toward the hotel room door.

"Ladies, could you give the bride and myself one moment of peace please?"

The women nodded peaceably and exited the room shortly thereafter.

It was only then that Natalie allowed herself to explode.

“I can’t do this, Scotty!” She said, allowing ample tears to breach the surface of her skin. “I can’t do this!”

Scotty reached for her arms and pulled her into him, attempting to quiet her, running his hands along her back.

“I believe you can,” Scotty told her quietly. “I believe that you won’t let anything or anyone get in the way of your wedding day...”

She continued to shake her head. She was convinced that the good part of her wedding day that she was supposed to ignore, only left her empty inside, only made her realize even more that her mother wasn’t there...that her mother wasn’t coming.

“I can’t do this,” she murmured through tears into the collar of his tuxedo.

Scotty nodded. “Yes, you can...yes, you can, Nattie...you know why?”

“No...why?” she sniffled.

“Because you deserve happiness,” he whispered, rubbing her back as she buried her face in his neck. “You deserve to be with a man who’ll treat you right...you deserve the happiness that you’ve given to so many people...”

Happiness...she allowed the word to run through her mind, and her spirit was soothed the moment that she pictured the future; Brandon is doing work in their large yard, she’s planting rose seeds for her garden near the wraparound porch,

and amidst the summer heat, the sneak away to a cool shady spot beneath a large willow tree and share a kiss...

She then pictures where her mother would fit into the equation...she doesn’t see it...she shakes her head and another tear falls.

“We went to eight different jewelry stores,” he admitted quietly, appearing as if he’d revealed some deep, dark secret that he felt guilty for telling. He pulled away from her to look into her eyes. He then caught a falling tear. “It seemed like there wasn’t a ring out there that was good enough for you. After the fifth jewelry store, Asha and I were tired, irritated, but we tried our hardest to be supportive. He was determined to find the perfect ring for your finger. We were more than elated that he was ready to settle down, that our two best friends were getting married. I’ve never seen him act that way about a girl. Not even about Sophia. It was as if you’d cast this strange spell on him. He was most certainly happier, he was funnier, and he was the Brandon that I became friends with in the first place. I’ve never seen him more devastated...it was just as hard a time for him as it was for you, believe me. Natalie, he’s loved you for as long as I can remember. And I think you’d be lying to yourself if you told me right now that you didn’t feel the same way for him. You both think you’re so slick, so sneaky...I have eyes, you know. And these eyes have witnessed the way you two look at each other.” “Scotty...that’s completely pointless now...I—I can’t...”

“It’s pointless? Nat, you’re kidding yourself. I know you remember the night the three of us went to Halley’s in Atlanta [Natalie nodded]. You remember how I told you that he wanted to hook us up? Sure, that’s what he told me and that’s what he told you. But he thinks that I don’t know him as well as I do. You should have seen the way he looked at you while we danced. It was like he wanted to kill me or something...”

“Scott...I...?”

“Look, Nat,” he said, placing his hands on the balls of her shoulders. “Just say the word...just say the word and I’ll get you out of here as fast as I can...if you really think that you can’t marry him, then don’t do it...but think about him...think about how he may feel...his parents aren’t sitting out there either, Natalie...he’s just as alone...but, I swear to you that boy fought for you...he fought for you because he loves you so much...you’re just going to leave him? You’re just going to give that all up because your parents are weak?”

Natalie lowered her eyes. Scotty placed his fingers at her chin. “Look at me, girl...”

So, she did.

“You’re a strong girl, Natalie Chandler. You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. So, stand strong for him...like he’s done for you so many times...live the life that you want...stop worrying about what everybody else wants...it’s your life...I’d say...fuck ‘em...fuck ‘em all that don’t know how much you love that boy...”

Natalie’s lungs filled with air then. Scotty caught another falling tear.

“You’re too pretty to be crying this way, girl,” Scotty said. “It’s your fuckin’ wedding day...let’s get you married and go have a party...how does that sound?”

Happiness...Scotland Lee, the hero.

“Oh yeah, and before I forget,” Scotty said, reaching into his jacket pocket once he’d gotten her to her feet. “He wanted me to give this to you...”

Scotty handed her a small, rectangular shape, wrapped in silver paper. She unwrapped it slowly, sniffing, and she lifted up a small, silver-framed, black-and-white photograph that Scotty took of her with her groom, walking the surf on Jekyll Island. She’d asked him if she could ride on his back all the way back to the house, and he’d agreed shortly following, and Scotty had captured the moment, as the waves crashed against Brandon’s legs.

She fought back the tears to keep from ruining her makeup any further.

Included was a note:

To my Hammock-Swaying Partner, My water-wary companion, my beach-combing friend:

I fell in love with you at this moment...

And I haven’t fallen out of it since...

8.15.06

She couldn't recall the last time that her entire body trembled this way, that every nerve inside of her body fell numb, and every thought in her mind was a gimmick to get her to breathe correctly. Even though she'd seen every aspect of Brandon it seemed, seeing him in this light seemed strange to her, seemed so foreign. And walking in front of over one hundred people while doing so didn't help either.

Chloe started playing her guitar, and Aunt Miri started to sing. She considered herself a musical genius then, because they sounded so good together. From her position off to the side, clutching her homemade bouquet for dear life, she watched the bridal party start to walk, as they had rehearsed, and she felt her breath escape her. She subtly fought the urge to retract again. Then, Scotty looked in her direction, just before he walked Maya down the aisle, and he winked.

Her hero had saved her again. She took a deep breath.

She could do this, without her mother, couldn't she? Yes, she could. She loved Brandon just that much, didn't she? Leaving him would've been the most selfish act...

The guests rose to their feet and her heart stammered a beat...

This...was...it...

She walked slowly, approached the runner, her veil, shielding her face and what stood at the head of the aisle was Brandon, beneath the trellis, with sunlight peering through the branches of the undulating willow tree above him.

They locked eyes...yes, she could do this.

She walked slowly along the runner, paced herself, breathed through her parted lips, kept her eyes focused only on Brandon, trying to keep her insides from caving in on her...

She looked from her left to her right; saw the admiring faces and her walk became easier. Then, she focused her eyes on Brandon again.

She reached the end of the aisle, considered herself the pillar of success, and just as she was about to give her bouquet to a crying Maya, she received a tap on her shoulder.

Slightly startled, Natalie turned around, placed a hand to her chest and gasped.

Helen Chandler extended her shaking hands to her daughter's veiled face, tears streaming from her eyes, and pulled her in close.

"I'm sorry," her mother whispered into her ear. "I'm sorry for everything."

Natalie forgave her instantly...

Natalie, stunned, crumbled into tears at the sight, and held onto her mother, for what seemed years. If she was looking for the momentum to carry on with the ceremony, then that was it. Her mother's embrace was enough to ignite any stint of courage and strength that she had in her...

Part of her wondered why her mother changed her mind, and another part of her couldn't have cared less. Her mother was there, dressed in the soft pink two-piece suit that the bride had picked out for her, with bouncy black curls, and one of the

widest smiles she'd seen in awhile. It was if her mother had reached some sort of clarity, some sort of peace of mind, which allowed her to give up the notion that the world, Brandon especially, was out to get her...

Or, maybe that observation was all in Natalie's mind; perhaps her mother had simply come to terms with the whereabouts of Natalie's heart and Natalie's strength. And for that, the bride was completely overjoyed...

They would talk later, she knew...

They would talk of the dumb things that they'd said to each other, while sipping sweet tea, while sitting on the porch swing, watching the sky fall around them. They would revel in the fact that despite it all, their connection still lay intact, and submerge themselves in a world of bliss, if only temporarily...

And Helen Marie Chandler would remind her that through hardship, she would still be her baby, forever and a day.

"We are gathered here in the sight of God and these witnesses to unite Brandon and Natalie in holy matrimony. As believers in Jesus Christ, they recognize that it was God who instituted marriage, and who said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' The God who made and redeemed them also instituted this relationship they are about to enter..."

She watched a tear glide down Brandon's cheek and she felt his hands tremble in hers. She was sure that it was the first

time that she'd ever seen him cry, stuttering through his vows, which made her cry, which prompted Granny Marie to pass on the box of tissues that she'd been clutching onto since Natalie walked down the aisle, to the weeping bridesmaids, who were sniffing so loud, that when it became Natalie's turn to voice her vows, she couldn't because her tears deterred her concentration. It was a humbling moment when Pastor Joins asked her to repeat, "I, Natalie Savannah, take thee Brandon David, to be my husband, and before God and these witnesses I promise to be a faithful and true wife," and she didn't, gazing at Brandon so ardently through her tear-smearred brown eyes that she didn't hear the pastor.

"Natalie Savannah," Pastor Joins called to her quietly.

Natalie chuckled with embarrassment, rolled her eyes close, felt the summer air about her face, her the sway of the branches above their heads, and allowed the amusement from her guests roll through her ears before she looked in the pastor's direction and said, "What?"

The guests laughed again, causing her to laugh again, giving both the bride and the groom an opportunity to wipe the wetness from their eyes.

Pastor Joins, smiling grandly, said, "Repeat after me, Dear Child..."

And she did, staring into Brandon's reddened eyes with the same earnestness that she'd done so many times before, on beaches, in cars, in apartments, in moonlit bedrooms, in wood-paneled houses. And she realized that she couldn't have

wanted anything more, and it stunned her that her heart could sustain such feelings, even at the moments where she was certain that she hated him...him and his domineering, aggressive ways...making her love him, even when she attempted to convince herself that she felt nothing for him.

She couldn't look at him then without feeling every nerve jolt, without realizing that this moment meant forever...

Shortly following, Maya handed her the ring and she slowly slid a platinum band on his left hand finger, which she'd had engraved to say: to the moon and back...8.15.06...and she quietly proclaimed, "With this ring, I thee wed..."

Brandon then retrieved his ring from Scotty and placed a platinum diamond band on her finger and quietly proclaimed, "With this ring, I thee wed..."

They then lit the unity candle, off to the right of the trellis, and stood before the officiate again. Pastor Joins looked toward the guests and asked them if anyone had any objections. Natalie closed her eyes then, as quiet fell over the crowd.

"Very well, then if there are no objections," Pastor Joins began.

Natalie sucked in her breath. She felt Brandon squeeze her hands a little tighter.

This...was...it...

"For as much as Brandon and Natalie have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and these witnesses, and thereto have pledged their faithfulness each to the other, and have pledged the same by the giv-

ing and receiving each of a ring, by the authority invested in me as a minister of the gospel according to the laws of the State of Georgia, I pronounce that they are husband and wife together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those that God has joined together, let no man put asunder...Brandon David, you may now kiss your bride..."

She internally encouraged him to hurry up, as he slowly lifted her veil over her head, revealing her runny nose, wet eyes and ruddy cheeks. He laid a hand along her jaw and gave her the most polite kiss she was sure she'd ever received from him.

And after they'd finished, Pastor Joins followed the pronunciation by encouraging all guests to bow their heads in prayer for the newlyweds.

Newlyweds! Natalie completely felt guilty, because while the pastor prayed, she could think of nothing else but the fact that she was now a wife, a married woman...to Brandon Greene!

When they turned to face their guests, Pastor Joins poignantly referred to them as Mr. and Mrs. Brandon David Greene, which made her clutch onto her stomach with one hand and grab his hand with her other. After all, that moment was simply too surreal to comprehend, and her only hope was that she made it to the end of the aisle without collapsing. She'd finally done it! She'd finally given in to that Brandon Greene!

He rained her with kisses while they sat in the limousine, completely alone in the park parking lot, waiting for the guests to filter out and head for the Inn on Harper Creek Road for the reception. They would stay after so Maya could take pictures. Part of her then didn't even want to go to the reception at all, although she'd spent so much time pouring herself over the seating chart, and the rose and votive centerpieces carefully constructed by Maya, making sure that Scotty's disc jockeying equipment was set up accordingly, and making sure that Jo got the cake into one of the Inn's kitchen freezers before the icing became melted and runny.

She'd savor the moment that they got to be alone, though her body lay exhausted, either from staying up the entire night before, or her panic attack in the hotel, which seemed light-years ago.

"I love you," he whispered against her cheek.

She pressed her lips against his and breathed, "God, I love you too..."

"Let's just start our honeymoon right now," Brandon encouraged with a slight grin.

That sounded like such a good idea; lying with Brandon, starting their life just right...

But she took a deep breath...one of them had to think rationally...

"Baby, you know we can't do that..."

He pressed his forehead against hers. "I know, I know...you're right, you're right...but it was a good idea, wasn't it?"

"Yes, in theory..."

"Were you nervous?"

"That's a stupid question...of course I was nervous..."

"Good...I'm glad that I wasn't the only one," he whispered, kissing her again. "I could barely breathe up there..."

"Same here..."

"My name is Natalie Greene," she said, wincing at the thought of it. "Can you believe that?"

"I honestly can't...but I like the sound of it...I really, really do..."

Ha, he finally got his wish. He'd finally received the relief he'd so long desired; loving Natalie caused him grief, caused him sleepless nights, made him angry. And there she was, kissing him as hard as he was kissing her, wearing the ring that he'd selected solely for her. She was his...

The way she looked in her dress startled him. Even at what she considered her worst her beauty still prevailed, so watching her twirl in that magnificent looking dress made his insides curl. The photographs that they took together by the willow tree that held so much feeling left him completely speechless. And it prompted him to think of being alone with her again... God, the things he planned to do to her...

Natalie had designed the event room at the Inn on Harper Creek with a perfect sense of simplistic extravagance. Each round table, arranged in three neat rows, where the guests sat

were pleasantly understated, with a cluster of cream-colored votive candles, encircled by pink and yellow rose petals, place cards with each guests' named on it (designed by Maya), and a series of disposable cameras, chocolates with his and Natalie's names on them, provided too, by Maya. Each chair was tied with either a pink silk ribbon or yellow. The bridal party was seated at a long white-clothed table on the other side of the ten by twelve foot hardwood dancing floor in the center, and was elevated enough so they Natalie and Brandon could survey the entire crowd while they weren't walking around. Scotty's disc jockey table was set up off to the right of the bridal party's table, and opposite that side sat a small square table where the cake sat.

Surely, he was proud of her and thought that she could add interior decorator to her repertoire. Uncle Martin was given the sole privilege of introducing the couple at the reception, and instead of getting straight to the point, Brandon and Natalie waited outside of the room while her uncle went on and on about how important Natalie was to him, about how he'd watched her grow, about how well-behaved she was as a child.

Blah, blah, blah...

Brandon only wanted to get on the inside, down a glass of champagne, see his friends and members of his family that did have the decency to show up, and forget about the fact that his parents were weak, and that he'd exhausted enough of his brain, worrying about their feelings. After all, Tallie was his

wife now; he could care less what they thought of her now. He could also care less what they thought of him too. Part of him only hoped that they'd admire him some day, for his bravery, for standing up for what he believed in, for not giving a shit about what anyone else thought about his situation with Natalie...

They sat beside each other at the bridal party table, and watched Natalie nervously twirl her boney finger around the stem of her champagne glass, as Maya told embarrassing stories of her as a child during her speech. Natalie was always the nerd; while Maya painted, Natalie played doctor, or astronaut, or alien. Natalie was always the tattletale; Maya and Sidney rarely got away with things (including the time that they accidentally broke their mother's favorite vase and tried to hide it) and resented her for that. He watched as she perked up when Maya said that Natalie was her best friend, that Natalie was a woman of her word, that Natalie was one of the most honest and caring people that she'd ever known. Natalie was there to defend her when the brothers that used to live on their street picked on her; Maya had a terrible fear of thunder and lightning, and Natalie was there to comfort her and tell her that it was nothing to be afraid of. The thunder was God beating his drum, and the lightning was God getting rid of all the "bad people" to protect them; Natalie was her dancing partner. Natalie was always the one to give her the best advice. Natalie could always make her laugh.

Maya then introduced the moment that she met him. It was a few weeks before their one-year anniversary, and Maya had driven up from Savannah to visit her for the weekend. She admitted that her first impression of him was that he was preppy and sort of snobbish, but all of that changed when she actually talked to him. “It was then that I concluded that Brandon had to have been one of the coolest white boys she’d ever met,” she told the guests. The guests laughed in return. She then said that she saw the way Natalie looked at him, and, as her sister, she immediately realized that Natalie was truly a girl in love, that she’d never seen her big sister look at anyone that way. And she knew that Brandon was the one for her.

“I wish them nothing but happiness,” Maya said, raising her glass. “Cheers...”

“Cheers,” the guests repeated. A series clinking glasses followed.

Scotty stood up next, adjusted his tuxedo jacket and cleared his throat. His best friend started talking about Natalie first, about how much fun he has whenever he’s around her, about how cool she was, about how smart she was. “Everybody knew that if you needed help on your homework, you went to Natalie...”

And the guests chuckled.

He then talked about the memories that he had of her; running around the house on Trent Road with Brandon’s red jacket on, baking them things on a regular basis, cooking them things, making them clean up their messes, watching television

with them. He then mentioned how he knew Brandon, how their friendship developed and how grateful he felt that their friendship had lasted this long. “I’m honored to be his best man,” Scotty told the guests. “I’m honored to be a part of this ceremony...between two of my closest friends...watching the two of them makes me believe that that kind of love is possible for anyone...with a little hard work and dedication...which never hurt anybody...to Brandon and Natalie, my brother and my sister...may you grow old together...”

“To Brandon and Natalie,” the guests repeated. The sound a clinking glasses rose again.

The sadness had disappeared from her eyes, and what had replaced them was unspoken peace, completion, satisfaction...or at least that’s what he read in them as they danced their first number as husband and wife on the hardwood flooring, with the light shining down on them.

No one else existed. He was only aware of the person that stood before him, whose hand he held, whose eyes he studied, whose smell intoxicated him, and impelled him to deal with the urge to anticipate things to come...

Tallie pulled him closer smoothly, and after she kissed the side of his face, she rested her cheek against his and a trace of warm breath escaped her parted lips and tickled his ear.

Brandon closed his eyes. The moment was almost more than he could take, which explained why he gently whispered, “I cannot wait to get you out of here,” against the side of her

face. He would assume that she agreed with him, because not long after he said that, she pulled away from him, examined his face with her eyes, and pressed her lips against his just once, just long enough for him to taste every centimeter of the surface of her lips.

“May we cut in?”

Brandon and Natalie parted from each other. He was sure that he looked awkward, looking at his father that way, but his shock had left him completely speechless, so long that he barely budged when he reached for Natalie’s hands and pulled her away from him.

Jack Greene only winked at him, twirling Natalie in a small circle as the song changed.

Helen Chandler pulled him out of his trance. “May I?”

Brandon adjusted his tuxedo jacket, cleared his throat and took the Evil Mother’s hands into his own.

They danced awkwardly together for several moments before Helen Chandler cleared her throat and said, “You look very handsome, Boy...”

“Thank you, Ms. Chandler...”

“I can finally see what my daughter sees in you,” Evil Mother said. “You clean up nicely...”

His body was tense, but he hoped she couldn’t sense it. This moment was too weird for words and he thought it best to keep his to a minimum to keep from upsetting her. Yet, he still wondered why she was there, what made her change her mind, and when she was going to apologize to Natalie for say-

ing all of those nasty things about him and about her. Perhaps he shouldn’t even wait on it. Perhaps what he should focus on at that moment was not stepping on his mother-in-law’s toes, or saying something to her that he would ultimately regret. After all, he had Natalie now, and the woman would just have to accept it, wouldn’t she? Yes, he reminded himself then that he shouldn’t give a damn about anyone else and what he or she thought...his main focus, for the time being, would be Natalie.

Then Evil Mother surprised him. “I’m sorry, Brandon,” she said quietly, as if she weren’t accustomed to apologizing to anyone. “I’m sorry for treating you the way I did this past year...I just had a hard time accepting that one of my daughters was actually getting married...”

He didn’t say a word. He only nodded.

“I only wanted what was best for Nattie,” she told him. “And if you’re it, then I have to accept that, don’t I?”

He nodded again.

“Good, good,” she said. “I know you’re a good person, Brandon...but...please, please...please treat my daughter right...can you promise me that?”

“I intend to...”

He’d encouraged her to call him “Dad”. She told him she’d try it, though it had been some time since she’d referred

to anyone as that in a long time. Proclaiming that she had a father figure in her life again seemed strange to her...

"You look absolutely stunning," Jack Greene told her, twirling her round once more. The other guests started to arrive on the dance floor as the song changed again.

"Thank you," she responded politely, bowing her head.

She looked over at Brandon. He matched her gaze. She tried to sense what he was feeling seeing his father there.

Earlier, Jack Greene had apologized for Martha Greene's absence. "I'm afraid my wife simply isn't ready," Mr. Greene admitted. "On the contrary, I couldn't miss my son's wedding for the world..."

Natalie was appreciative. She was sure that Brandon, although he'd been angry with his father, was quite elated that his father had decided to show up, though he was rather late.

Natalie danced with the father another round, before Mark and Jo Greene cut in. The Greene brother spun her around what seemed a dozen times, making her laugh. Somehow, in the midst of this, she'd lost sight of Brandon in the crowd of Chandlers and Greenes, who, despite amazing cultural differences, harmonized a lot more than she ever could have anticipated, and the more men that approached her, asking for a dance, the less she thought about finding him. Besides, they had a whole two weeks in the Caribbean to be together. One or two hours wouldn't devastate her.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed or what time it was, but by the time Scotty left the DJ table and asked for a

dance number, she'd danced with each Greene brother more than once, had danced with her cousins Michael and Cory and Marcus, and all three of her uncles.

"Finally, I get to dance with you," Scotty told her, reaching at her waist. "I wasn't sure I'd get to see you again..."

"Scotty, hush," she told him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pulling him close. "I'm here now...I've been waiting all night to dance with you..."

"Good, good..."

"Thank you for the music..."

"Of course..."

"And the speech..."

"I practiced it three times for you..."

"Did you?"

"No," Scotty chuckled jokingly. "I completely made it up as I went along..."

"Either way," Natalie said, rolling her eyes. "It was beautiful..."

"I'm glad that you liked it..."

The song changed, the music slowed, and their pace slowed.

"Thank you," Natalie said, seizing the opportunity.

"For what?" he asked her, visibly confused.

"For earlier today," she told him. "Thank you..."

"Oh, please," he said, rolling his eyes. "It's been forgotten..."

Natalie allowed herself to smile. "I could have really hurt him, couldn't I have?"

Scotty huffed and hesitantly nodded. "I can honestly venture to guess that he would've been devastated..."

"So, I did the right thing, didn't I?"

"Nat, either way, you would've been following your heart," Scotty advised. "Brandon would have been pissed, surely, but eventually he would have come to understand that what you did felt like the right thing for you..."

Natalie fell silent for a moment and pursed her lips. Then she looked into her friend's eyes again.

"I think I made the right decision..."

Scotty smiled warmly. "I think you did too...I just wasn't going to pressure you into going through with something that you didn't want to do..."

"And that's what a good friend is for," she replied, punching his arm lightly.

"I'm glad you married him," Scotty told her, twirling her around slowly. "Not to sound completely trite...but...he seriously would have been lost without you..."

"Like he is now..."

"Come again?"

"He disappeared and I have no idea where he went," Natalie said, glancing over his shoulder. "It's getting late and I don't want him to miss anything before we leave..."

"Hmm," Scotty began, turning his eyes into search mode. "Last time I saw him, he was dancing with Asha...no wait...the last time that I saw him he was talking to his father..."

"His father?"

"Yes, ma'am," Scotty said. "And the conversation didn't seem to be going well..."

"Oh, Lord," Natalie said with a heavy sigh. "Well, I think it's time that I go looking for him..."

"Good luck...I should go back and man the DJ table..."

She started her search for her missing husband, but got distracted when Maya wanted her to pose with a group of ladies from her church for a picture, or when Asha wanted to know where the guests should put their presents, or when Granny Marie wanted a hug, or when Joanna wanted to give her sex advice in the middle of the dance floor. She did manage, however, to ask each of them if they'd seen Brandon and all of them had given her the same answer: he'd walked away with his father.

She was en route to the event room's exit when her mama crossed her path and stopped her cold.

"We need to talk," her mother advised.

Natalie agreed, but she wasn't sure that she wanted to talk about it then. She wasn't sure that she could deal with all of her mother's emotional baggage that night (her special night). She only wanted to rescue her husband at the moment, wherever he was, and she surprised herself when she leaned into

her mother, kissed her cheek and said, “Not now, Mama,” and continued about her way.

He wasn’t sure if he bought his father’s apology, but he enjoyed that vision of watching his father squirm, of watching his father in a state of humility. They stood in the lobby of the Inn and Brandon had his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He clenched his teeth tightly, to keep from saying something that he’d regret, all while Jack Barrett Greene reminded him of how important he was, how all of his sons were important, and how he didn’t mean for any of it to get as out of control as it did. He told him that he appreciated his level-headedness, his vigor, and that Natalie was a great girl, blah, blah, blah. He even tried to apologize for his mother’s words, for his mother’s reaction to the situation, to the terrible things she’d said to Natalie’s mother about their financial situation. His father stood back and did nothing! Not a goddamn thing!

He wasn’t as willing to forgive his father as easily as Natalie had forgiven her mother. It would take some time, perhaps on the honeymoon, where he could relax, collect his thoughts, be away from anything and everything that brought him stress.

When his father started to move into the conversation about his future with Natalie (i.e. finances, living situations, etc.), he became increasingly uneasy, until he felt something grab at his arm.

Natalie had found him, had returned to his side, and he allowed himself to breathe again.

“There you are,” she told him, smiling at his father. “Mr. Greene...”

“Natalie,” his father said to his bride. He then looked in Brandon’s direction and sighed. “Son, we’ll talk about this later...”

Brandon nodded compliantly. Of course they would; when he had all of his thoughts sorted out, when he could articulate his feelings and tell his parents about how much they’d hurt him and Natalie over the past year.

He was finally alone with Natalie again, in an empty lobby, while the music blared from their event room.

He reached for her hand.

“Are you okay?” she asked him.

He nodded. He was more than okay when she was around.

If she only knew...

“And we’ll talk about this later?”

He nodded again. He most certainly didn’t want to ruin that night, her night...

Another hour had passed, and Brandon knelt before Natalie, who sat in a chair, his hands, climbing up the length of her right leg until he wrapped his fingers around the garter encircling her narrow thigh. Natalie giggled, genuinely embarrassed and ticklish, covering her mouth with her hands until he finished. He gave it a quick toss over his shoulder. Ha, Scotty caught it...

They finally cut the cake together, and when it came time to feed it to each other, Natalie impulsively smashed the cake against the bridge of Brandon's nose. And while the guests jeered and clapped, raising their champagne flutes in the air in their direction, Brandon stood there glaring at her with complete disbelief. Laughing, she proceeded to lick the icing off of his face, getting some of the butter cream goodness around her mouth.

Asha caught the bouquet of roses that Natalie threw high over her head. Her bridesmaid then looked in Scotty's direction, rolled her eyes and dropped the bouquet on the ground out of protest...

Brandon and Natalie locked eyes and snickered to themselves, mentally acknowledging the fact that they would deal with the Scotty-Asha saga on another date...

Then they said goodbye, standing in the lobby, in front of the elevators. He cordially shook his father's hand, gave his brothers, Scotty included, lengthened embraces as they wished him well. He watched as Natalie hugged her sisters, Asha included, and Joanna, who all had tears running down their faces, then her Grandmother and her aunts and uncles, and then her mother. He watched her start to cry then, watched as her mother whispered something in her ear, Natalie nodding obediently. She then pulled away from her mother, held her hands lingeringly, swinging them left to right, before they both took deep breaths. Helen then reached out to wipe Natalie's

tears away before her daughter started to walk away from her...

It wasn't until they got onto an elevator that he suggested that she look at the expression he had engraved in her ring. Natalie slid the ring off of her left hand, brought it closer to her eyes and slowly read:

Since Trent road...

She couldn't believe what she was about to do, couldn't believe that it took her this long, couldn't believe that her body felt this warm, this ready. She blamed the sensation on all the champagne that she consumed over the course of the reception, as if she knew what would transpire once they got back to the bed and breakfast, beneath moss-laden trees on Harper Creek Road. They'd kissed for a while, completely ignoring the bowl of fruit and plate of bread and cheese and bottles of wine that Scotty and Asha had sent to the room. They'd even left a note for the both of them on top of the bed, which read, "We love you both and we hope that you have an incredible honeymoon!" which she consequently smashed when Brandon laid her down on the comforter gently, peering into her eyes. Yes, his kisses had been so inviting, so warm, so attentive, that, in the moment she came up for air, she felt the tinge in her voice that almost begged him for it, she, a girl who'd waited almost twenty-four years of her life for this, he, who'd waited so

patiently, who never rushed her, never forced her to do anything that she wasn't prepared for.

But he certainly heard it in her voice then.

"Please," she whispered into his face. "Keep going..."

"Are you sure," he asked her quietly, kissing the tip of her nose.

Of course she was sure. She would push the tainted image of Brandon being with any other girl but her, and she would focus on the softness in his eyes. She ran a finger along his cheekbone, gently, slowly, coaxing him as she nodded her head. She took a deep breath as Brandon raised his body and pulled his white undershirt over his head. And he laid back down with her, laying his lips along her cheek, leaving soft, warm kisses. This was a good start, wasn't it? She placed her hand on the back of his head, breathed slowly through her parted lips to stave off her beckoning trembling. Her limbs stiffened as his lips rolled to her neck, accompanied by a warm and hungry tongue, causing a strange sensation in a part of her body that she'd never felt before.

Brandon lifted his head momentarily, grinning down at her. "You've got to relax, baby...you're not going to enjoy it if you don't relax..."

So she took deeper breaths. She could do this, right? If Asha and Maya and Sid could do this, then so could she, right?

She pressed her fingers into his back as he laid his hand along the inside of one of her thighs.

"Relax, Natalie," he told her, gently pushing her thigh outward.

Their lips met for a moment, lingeringly, and she sucked in her breath, pinching his hair between her fingers.

"I love you," he said, calmly, as if he hoped that that would help.

It did. It reminded her of how they got there, if reminded her that he deserved her, and her body.

And her body started an awful shiver, the kind that made her bare breasts and her stomach and her thighs jiggle. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that she felt completely exposed, completely vulnerable, as Brandon's pink lips explored every inch of her naked brown skin. She lay there with him in the darkness, running her fingers up and down his dampened back, pressing her fingers into the surface of his skin, biting her lip to a bloody pulp, silently anticipating the moment that this affair would take full flight. She became aware of every sensation around her, inside of her; the feeling of wetness and the warmth of his breath, and the feel of his hands probing her every inch, even those discreet places that she wasn't even aware of. It seemed that nothing else mattered but his proximity, the feeling of how he moved near her, and touched her hair and touched her there...

And then his face loomed over hers in shadow, peace surrounding them, replacing the utter chaos that ran inside of her. She extended her hand toward his face, pressing her finger into his cheek, encouraging him to keep going, letting him

know that she was okay. Lord, she'd waited for this forever, could recall each time she dreamed about it, fantasized this moment, knowing that she wanted Brandon to have her, and do with her as he so pleased.

She thrived under the disparity between his aggressiveness and bedroom knowledge, to her ignorance, to her rose-hued virtue, treating him as a teacher, with whom she desired a firm lesson...

It wasn't until his hips began to narrow in on her inner thighs that she permitted herself to explore his body with her hands. She enjoyed the way his muscles flexed and pulled against her as he moved over her, she loved his moistened skin, his warmth, the feel of his heart beating rapidly against his chest, the hardness she felt against her thigh.

They kissed again, pressed their foreheads together, and he whispered, "Are you ready?"

Of course she was! Could he not feel that she was ready? Could he not see it in her eyes? Perhaps she'd hidden it so well for so long that she wasn't sure how to express her craving. She'd spent several hours the night before with her bridesmaids in the hotel room (after the surprise male stripper), drunkenly discussing sex, with each of her ladies trying to explain to her how it was supposed to feel. None of them could tell her. They told her that the sensation couldn't be explained with words; it could only be felt.

She had been preparing herself for this moment for weeks, perhaps starting with her trip to see her doctor in Decatur, ex-

plaining that she was getting married and wanted to start taking the Pill. She started swallowing a regular dosage a few days following the arrival of her first prescription.

Everything seemed and felt right for this moment...

She nodded slowly, focusing in on his eyes, wanting him to continue.

"I'll take this slow," Brandon whispered against her mouth.

She hoped he would. He'd told her once before that every girl he'd been with had all been sexually active, and that she'd be the first virgin that he'd ever slept with. She wasn't sure how comfortable that made her feel, but she trusted his experience almost as much as she trusted him.

She closed her eyes tight, coached her mind to help relax her body and slow the rapid pace at which her heart beat, and take in the sensation with open arms. He was pushing against her, slowly, gingerly, the muscles in his buttocks, clenching between her, and she was sure that she scared him when she cried out suddenly in regards to the unexpected sting that she felt inside of her. He gazed down at her warily and whispered, "Are you alright?"

She wasn't sure at that moment. This feeling was completely different, completely new, and she was certain that she'd never felt so close to Brandon before...

She nodded.

"Are you sure? I can stop..."

She nodded. Heck, they'd gotten this far, and his expedition to her inner workings was almost complete.

“Tal, I don’t want to hurt you...”

She knew that he didn’t. Why would he?

Natalie caught her breath, licked her lips and whispered,

“Bran, just keep going...”

So, he did. He quietly worked his way inside, subtly flinching even if she made the slightest noise of discomfort. He didn’t move within her enough before she told him to stop, told him that it hurt too much...

“Maybe we should sleep on it,” she suggested quietly in the darkness as he slowly worked his way out of her.

Brandon rolled on his back, rested his arms behind his head and nodded. “Yea, you’re right,” he said. He then rolled his head over and looked at her. “How do you feel?”

“I feel...different...”

“Different, how?”

“I don’t know, I can’t explain it...”

“I’m sorry if it wasn’t what you thought it was going to be...”

“Brandy, please don’t apologize,” she assured him. “It wasn’t expecting perfection...besides, we have a long time to perfect it...and when we do...”

“I completely catch your drift...” He smiled. “I’m sorry if I hurt you...”

Natalie then raised her bare body, straddled his waist beneath thin white sheets and a glowing moon, and kissed his lips softly.

“Stop apologizing,” she whispered into him. “You did everything just right...”

And she kissed him again.

“And I have something to show you...”

“What’s that?”

She rolled off of him, onto her back, spread her legs, and directed his eyes toward the area. She pointed to the image of a white lily, perfectly inked on the inside of her left thigh.

Brandon’s eyes widened at the discovery, ran his fingers over it, whispered, “It’s like opening Pandora’s Box,” and pressed his lips against it softly...

Chapter 22

NEWLYWED
NEVIS



SHE MEASURED HER HAPPINESS as being the moment that she stepped off of the ferryboat in Nevis, a quiet island in the southern West Indies, in the late afternoon, the sun, warm, golden, setting in the blue sky. They stepped onto the shore of Pinney's Beach, her brown sandals wedged in the brown sand, the sea darkening by the fading sunlight, the breeze a strong one. They were directed to their room promptly following, a villa, with a small pool in the back overlooking the green fairway, a marble-laden lanai with two wicker chairs, banana leaf fans, a king-sized bed, a full-sized kitchen, and a large master bath with a deep-seated tub, encircled by a crowning of palm trees undulating under the gentle wind.

They ate dinner at Mango's, the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, the sky, deep blue, the stars, fantastic, the humidity, lacking, a single white boat, swaying against an eased current, calypso played. Brandon, who'd chosen to keep his hair long for the wedding, had let it go wild that night, looked comfortable in a cream shirt, rolled at the sleeves, and linen pants, smelled deliciously good, and she, the newly de-virginized bride, patiently anticipating the moment that they could be alone again.

She looked at him and she looked at the ring on her left hand. Her happiness lied there, with him, her husband; how funny that word sounded, how strange it was to look at him from across the wooden teak table, with white candles held in clear glass vases, and know what forever meant, finally, know

then that she was old enough to understand it, that they were old enough to stand it.

They watched the sky fall, shared a plate of conch fritters and mango salsa, sipped from the same bottle of white zinfandel, laughed. Yes, they laughed the way friends should, didn't they? After all, that is the way they started, right? Brandon, a preppie, pretentious, deep-voiced prince, strong, loud, wide-eyed and truthful, and, she, quiet, yielding, sweet, soft and humble. How trite was it that they connected so easily? Did that happen everyday? Brandon told a joke, she laughed hard, and she wondered how she got so lucky. She figured that she would never admit to him that the moment she fell in love with him, she knew that he was the one. Ha, did that even exist? Sure. As far as Natalie Chandler was concerned Brandon was all that she needed, all she could ever think about, blushed at the idea that the word obsession was quickly aligned with him.

He didn't mean to get her that drunk. But, as they walked the stone pathway, beneath the palm trees that night in the direction of the main house, he couldn't help but laugh at her. Damn it, the girl couldn't walk in a straight line to save her life, she stumbled over simple words, and that breathy giggle was enough to drive him crazy. He would take her dancing on the ocean terrace by the calypso band. She said that the music reminded her of the days that her father was around, and hell, he couldn't deny her that. He hoped that it wouldn't take long, though. The broad-shouldered, beast of a man couldn't wait

to get his beautiful brown wife into that big floral bed. At this point, his body warmed with rum punch, belly full of tenderloin, he figured he could go all night, but he would take it slow. She deserved romance, didn't she? After all, her body was new to this, and the couple of times they'd done it since the wedding had hurt her a little, and she, having perfected the whole "submissive", "vulnerable" act, was a willing learner and participant. And he would give it all that he had inside of him.

He would just sway with her a little on the colored stone of the terrace, feel the breeze blow his hair, hear the steel drums, feel a bit of ocean spray, and he would hold her. Yes, he would hold for her as long as he wanted. She smelled so good then, drove him nuts, and he could feel her hips roll a little against him.

Oh, Tallie, don't do that, please...might lose it out here...

His stomach did some funky flip when she pressed her lips against the side of his face. Yes, those lips. He brought them to his own, smaller, less significant, but excited, loving the fullness of hers, anticipating the many moments that this pair of plush brown confection would be near him in the many years that they would be together.

His wife...

Ha, Brandon Greene, you finally did it! And who would've thought it? He, who was shamefully so far up Sophia Baldwin's ass, that there was no hope for him. But he'd been at the bar with Scotty one night some years ago and his curly-headed companion had asked him about the pretty, brown skinned

thing with the legs that seemed to go on for days (from that moment on, Scotty had secretly called Natalie "Legs") at the Christmas party his junior year.

"Where did you take her? You nasty bastard, did you land her? Behind Sophia's back, I'm so proud of you," Silly Scotty had said.

"No, man, it was nothing like that," Brandon blushed over his beer. "We went for...tea..."

"Tea? You little faggot. You really went for tea?"

"Yes. It's the truth. She's a really cool girl..."

"But Brandon, you don't have friends that are girls...well, that you actually talk to the morning after..."

He remembered that his heart had tightened. *"Well... funny thing is, this girl is different...she did ask about you..."*

"Did she?"

"Yes..."

"I met her, but I forgot her name. What's her name?"

"Natalie..."

"Natalie," Scotty had sung. *"Dude, give me her number..."*

"Not a chance," Brandon told him. *"You're not getting anywhere near her...this one's a good one..."*

"Come on, man," Scotty said, slapping his friend on the back. *"I just want to take her out...you know for tea..."*

He was reluctant to give Scotty her number. He only wanted her for himself. But, he wanted to put up a substantial front in the beginning of their friendship; he wanted to pretend as if Tallie didn't matter. Sure, he would give his best

friend a chance to score with the pretty girl. And deep down he could only pray that Natalie turned him down.

He would never look at her and admit that, from the first moment he looked at her (yes, even a drunken mess), he'd fallen. Ha! Brandon Greene, did you actually fall in love that quickly? Doesn't love take time? Practice? Effort? Surely. Yes, in any ordinary situation, these things would all come into play. But, loving Natalie came easy. Loving Natalie was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Wanting to take care of her was something that he'd always felt, always felt was his purpose. She would never know that sometimes he'd stay up and watch her sleep, that sometimes (sometimes!), he'd thank God that he'd found her, that the only reason that he went to graduate school at all was so he could stay in Athens and be near her. No, she'd think he was crazy, and she'd tell him so, and maybe, she'd rethink being with him at all.

But hell, he hoped not. He kind of liked the whole idea of waking up in the morning and seeing her there. The image of her sleeping face kind of made him happy.

When the hell did you get so sappy, Brandon Greene?

Weren't you one of the love-them-and-leave-them types? When did you start giving a damn?

He'll say that it was the moment that Natalie Chandler, skinny and quiet, sat with him at the pond that night and listened to his drunken ramble. Maybe it was the moment when he knew that she wasn't going anywhere, when he knew that by her side was where he wanted to be. Or, maybe, it was the

moment that he'd fallen out of love with Sophia because he was so in love with her. Damn you, Brandon Greene! You always have to get your way, don't you? And you knew, didn't you? You knew that you'd have her.

He drove their rented golf cart back to the villa, set on a decline, buried beneath lush tropical flowers.

Natalie, who could barely walk, had turned into a giggling mess, and he carried her into the house (of course, she called it a "threshold"), had thrown her on the bed. She smiled, bit her bottom lip, had pulled him down by his collar with her, he, his face reddened, forehead sweaty. She started kissing his face all over, grabbed him at his shoulders, giggling through and through. And she pushed him away, demanded that he turn out the light this instant! And he followed order without hesitation.

"I'm beginning to like this whole 'sex' thing...can I try it this way, tonight?" She'd said in the darkness.

So much for romance.

It was as if he'd awakened nerves that she didn't know she had. She was like a bird that had finally been set free from its cage. She could finally let go of any repressed emotion or sensation or feeling that she'd held inside. She was now a woman who enjoyed sex, many times over, beneath starlit skies on the cool tile floor of the lanai, on the cool marble countertop beneath a banana leaf fan in the kitchen, between the fluffy sheets on a rain-filled, balmy afternoon. She allowed her fin-

gers to wander the length of his skin, to probe into various shadowed niches that she was once so fearful of. She writhed under the warmth and under his proximity, beneath his heavy breathing and his large hands grasping, and his subtle groans and the bed of sweat between them. Each time they made love, she felt Brandon transform into a carnal beast of knowledge and of experience, going fast when she wanted to, or slowing himself down when she petted him gently. He seemed to have mastered every swift maneuver of his hips and of his pelvis, to make the moans escape her lips just right. He was a connoisseur with his tongue and with his wet lips, sending chills around and through her, causing her to tremble with delight to this new feeling.

As each day passed, she became less and less apprehensive about displaying her naked body to him, and became more and more intrigued by the unwillingness of his hands to leave her skin untouched. On some morning occasions, she opted to remain bare, awaiting and breathlessly anticipating the next moment that his hands would find a home against her curves, around her breasts, between her thighs...

Perhaps being so near to the water brought her alive. Perhaps after feeling a bit of sea spray against her thirsty skin while she watched the sky fall beneath lofty palms with her husband, witnessing the stars appear as the crickets cried made the world disappear. She became less aware of the people around her, of her worries that awaited her in Georgia, and became a slave to the balmy breeze, to her husband's embrace, to the smell of his

ocean-misted, creamy skin and saltwater hair. He'd hold her near and she'd bury her face in a sea of black hair, running it past her lips, kissing each patch softly. They'd sit in the open-air lobby after dinner, catch a glimpse of the starry sky above them, sip drinks, hold each other. She loved to tease him in public. She loved to run chilly, ripe mango across his lips, watching him lean up to bite and miss. She loved to graze her fingertips along the backs of his ears over cocktails at Banana's on the summit, while they witnessed the city lights of St. Kitts across the waters glisten, liven, flicker, stretch as far as the eye could see. She loved to press her lips against the nape of his warm neck in the infinity pool outside of the villa, while the sun hid behind a thin veil of graying clouds, threatening a tropical afternoon rainfall. She was certain that she'd never feel closer to Brandon than in these moments, with the fire inside of her ignited, anticipating, with each touch and feel of his heartbeat against her, the moment that he'd take her, and pour his soul inside of her...

Chapter 23

MARTHA'S
VINEYARD



MAMA, THE GREENE BROTHERS, and JACK GREENE helped them move into the cozy three-story townhouse after they came back from Nevis, a domicile with navy shutters, a covered porch and yellow siding, with a full kitchen and a master bedroom with tray ceilings and white crown molding, and cream-colored carpeting, the entire interior, smelling new and untouched, exciting Natalie.

They came across it months following Brandon's final proposal and both considered it a good and affordable find. It was located on a narrow drive lined with baby myrtles and twig-thin Bradford pears, called Swaying Maple Trail. They shoved the boxes in, after Brandon lifted Natalie into his arms and carried her over the threshold, her, squealing through and through, taken by complete surprise at the gesture, and they planted the boxes anywhere that they could find space, Helen, scolding the brothers if they placed the boxes on the hardwood flooring in the living room and dining room, knowing that it probably scuffed easily.

They would save the painting job that needed to be done till the morning. Brandon and Natalie, having spent many long hours, fussing over paint chips and swatches of blues and yellows and greens and fiery reds, had decided on something called "Costa Rica Blue", which wasn't too dark, and wasn't too baby or Carolina blue or too girly. It was just the right color for Brandon to still feel masculine, although he was still upset that Natalie had chosen such a feminine bedding suit for

their mahogany sleigh bed that was to be delivered the following day.

The couple settled down with their family at a pizza place a few miles down a main road in Chapel Hill. They didn't want to venture out too far because they were still new to the place. And it was then, when Natalie watched her husband shove yet another slice into his mouth that Jack Greene asked the question that they weren't prepared for, that made Brandon nearly choke to death on his slice, making him stare blankly at his father, making her look at her husband with the same expression, completely shocked that they hadn't discussed this subject at all...

"So," Jack Greene began, placing his napkin down. "Is it too soon to talk about baby?"

Yes, way too soon! Poor Natalie was barely a woman of sexual experience, had barely got the swing of things, and now he asks her this question? Yes, it's too soon. And she can tell that Brandon thinks the same thing. Brandon will start the new job in Raleigh in a couple of days, which promises big money someday, and she'll start school in a couple of weeks, which will probably leave her mentally crazed, and then there was the bills, and decorating the house, and making sure she stayed fit for her husband, making sure that she kept things exciting in the bedroom, making sure that he had a hot meal on the table each night, making sure that they could make rent, making sure that they had groceries each week, making time for Bran-

don and the family and Asha and Scotty and getting to know the Greenes...

Yes, this wasn't the right time!

And Natalie swallowed hard, met eyes with her husband, who placed his slice down slowly.

"Well," Brandon said, clearing his throat. "We just got married all of three weeks ago, Dad..."

"Yes, I know that, son, but..."

"You see, the truth is, Mr. Greene..."

"Jack, Natalie, call me Jack..."

"Jack," Natalie said. "You see...we...Brandon and myself...we haven't really discussed children yet."

"You haven't discussed it yet?" Helen Chandler questioned, raising her right eyebrow the way she does when she disapproves. "I knew they rushed into this..."

"Now, now, Helen," Jack Greene said. "Hear the kids out...they're busy people..."

"And people are having kids much later these days, Ms. Chandler," Mark Greene interjected. "They're more concerned with getting their careers established..."

"Exactly, Ma," Natalie said, touching Brandon's arm. "Just because we haven't discussed it doesn't mean that we won't ever...isn't that right Brandon...?"

Brandon didn't answer initially. He lifted his bottle of Budweiser, took a couple of gulps, before saying, "Right..."

"And Brandon hasn't even started his new job," Natalie explained, looking at him. "We should give him a chance to see

if this is the career that he wants to pursue...and then there's medical school..."

"Right," Jack Greene said. "Natalie will be in school for awhile..."

"But, you don't want to wait too late, do you, Nattie?" Mama asked.

Natalie could feel her throat clam up. She took a sip of water before answering. "Well...no..."

"Exactly," Helen Chandler said.

"Helen, will you leave them alone?" Jack Greene said. "Like Brandon said, they've only been married for three weeks...let them breathe a little...they've got time..."

They put their family up in a Double Tree downtown and they returned to Swaying Maple, pulled the king-sized, pillow top mattress up the narrow flight of carpet-covered stairs, into the moon-bathed master bedroom at the top, and covered themselves in a thin white sheet as they started to make love just before midnight. Yes, she wanted it, hadn't thought of much else during the drive from Georgia in the U-haul truck, when he was rubbing her thigh, running his fingers up and down her arm and the back of her neck, dreaming of the moment that they could be alone again.

And now, they finally were, weren't they? And Brandon was kissing every inch of her brown nakedness, every inch of warmth and sweat and wetness that covered her, that longed for him, that appreciated his broad shoulders, the way his mus-

cles in his back flexed when he moved over her, the way his hips rocked between her, the way her back arched for him, while John Mayer wailed from the CD player perched in a corner...

Yes, she was high, and somewhere in the middle of it all, she wanted to scream, the way she'd done in Nevis, laying against the cool marble floor in the screened lanai...

But her thoughts kept her from doing so, even though Brandon felt just right, even though she ran her fingers through his thick hair, even though she felt the balmy September breeze through a cracked window above them, even though Brandon made those noises...yes, the ones where she knew he was really enjoying himself; soft, low, bellowed groans, while he subtly gasped for air...

Her thoughts drifted back to dinner, and what his father said, and how Brandon had reacted to the subject; how he'd remained almost silent, making her worry...really worry...

And she stopped his hips from rocking between her, stopped his lips from kissing her collarbone, and she tried to catch her breath, him, looking strangely down at her, his breath caught, her, holding his face...

"What, baby...w—what is it?" he asked her.

"We need to talk..."

"What? Now?"

"Yes...now..."

She knew that he didn't want to. She knew that he only wanted to keep going, and with his momentum, Natalie was al-

most certain that he would have no trouble going for at least another hour or so...

He rolled off of her, flopped onto the bouncy mattress, and she rested her head on his chest, feeling his deep breaths...

"Bran..."

"W—what? What do we need to talk about?"

"Us..."

"Not necessarily sure I like where this is going," he told her. "But I have an idea...because I know Natalie so well..."

"You do?"

"Yes...it's about what my father said..."

"Wow..."

"Because, I've been thinking about it too..."

"Really?"

"Of course...we're married, aren't we? It's my issue just as much as it is yours..."

"So...it's an issue...?"

"No, no...wrong choice of words..."

"I can't believe we've never talked about this...I mean, we've been together, how long?"

"Long enough to have talked about it..."

"Exactly..."

There was silence for a moment, and she could hear Brandon still trying to catch his breath. He then cleared his throat and whispered, "Natalie..."

"Yes?"

“I should tell you that...you know, about kids...I...”

“You...what?”

“I’ve never really...jeez...I’ve never really been into...you know...having them...that’s why I was acting so funny at dinner...I didn’t think that it was the right time to tell you...and I definitely didn’t want to say it in front of your mother...”

Natalie felt her stomach do something funky and her head began to throb. Yes, she wished that they’d talked about it sooner. A lot sooner! It might have changed how she felt about marrying him at all...

“Say something, Tallie...”

She couldn’t. She had to process it first. She had to breathe first. She had to try and picture a life without having kids with her soul mate, a life without providing grandchildren for her mother...

Brandon sat up on one elbow and looked down at her.

“Tal...”

She only rolled over. Looking at him at that moment would make her cry...

“Tallie, I’m...I’m sorry,” he whispered, touching her shoulder. “I should have told you sooner...I don’t know why it never came up...”

“It should have,” Natalie said quietly. “It should have come up that you don’t want to have kids...”

“Tallie...”

This time, when he tried to touch her, she pulled away.

“Baby, don’t clam up like that,” he said. “I hate when you do that...look at me...”

“If I look at you, I might kill you...or cry...”

“Natalie, please don’t cry...God, don’t cry...”

“You know, I always assumed that with you working at Bledsoe all these years that you...that you...”

“You know I like kids,” he said, reaching down to kiss her arm. “I just...baby, I’m just scared...”

She sighed, and rolled over to look at him.

“That’s better,” he said, running his fingers across her cheek.

“Scared of what? You have your family, and your friends...and you have me...”

“I know...it’s great...but, babe, I’m just like any other guy...I get scared, you know? And think of what this kid has to go through...being, you know...”

“Mixed...”

“Right...”

“It’s not too late, you know...”

“Not too late for what?”

“To get this thing annulled,” she said, sitting up. “You can go and have children with some pretty blond named Stacy and live the pretentious suburban life that Martha wants you to lead...”

She felt her throat tighten and she attempted to fight back the tears then.

“You must be out of your fucking mind if you think that I’d do that...how dare you say something like that to me...?”

“How do you think I feel, Brandon?” she said, her voice cracking. “The love of my life just tells me that he doesn’t want kids with me because I’m black...that definitely makes me feel good...”

“Tallie, don’t cry...”

Too late, she thought, as she felt a tear run down her cheek. He lifted his hand to her face and caught the next fallen tear with his finger.

“God, the one moment we get to be alone all day, and I go and ruin it...”

“No, it’s good that we get this out now...”

Silence fell between them. Natalie spent that time searching on the floor for her clothes while he sat there motionless.

“I just need time, Tallie,” he told her, escaping his trance. “I mean, you haven’t even started school, I haven’t even started my new job...why don’t we just see where we are in a couple of years and then we can talk about it then...?”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied, finding her pajama bottoms tossed across the room.

She found her clothes piece by piece and began slipping them on.

“Where are you going?” he asked her.

Natalie sighed, shook her head with frustration and bit her lip.

“Tal, where are you going?” he repeated.

“I have to go,” she told him, her voice barely audible. “I have to go for a walk or drive...I—I just have to get out of here for a little while...I can’t look at you right now...”

“Tallie, don’t...”

But, she walked out anyway. She would get out of the house before she screamed, before she pulled all of her hair out, and she hoped to God that he didn’t come running after her, unsure of what she might say or what argument they could potentially get into. She only hoped that he’d respect her need to be alone.

When she returned to the house, some several minutes before dawn, she found him sitting up on the bare mattress, with the sheet angrily balled up in his lap, with his face buried in his large hands. She sighed, and though her anger still prevailed, she didn’t enjoy seeing him like that. She sat down next to him, heard his jagged breathing and wrapped her arm around his shoulder, resting her head against his lowered one.

“We’ll figure this out together,” she told him in whisper.

He didn’t answer. He only raised his head from the hold of his hands and rested it in her lap.

...

They never really got around to talking about it. They simply woke up the next morning, let their parents into their new home, started their painting job, and virtually pretended as if the conversation had never happened. Natalie figured that if

she knew anything about him, she figured that he'd come around eventually. She also figured that if he'd learned anything about her over the course of their time knowing each other, he'd know that she couldn't live without having a family of her own. Her only hope was that when the conversation did occur, it didn't turn into another fight, leaving him confused and looking like a jerk, and her, shedding tears, contemplating whether or not she made the right choice by being with him...

Natalie started school in September. Brandon started his new job at the firm in Raleigh. They had no money for furniture, barely any to pay the bills, car payments and groceries, and by the time their first Christmas came around, they were on two completely different sleeping schedules. Natalie slept with pens and pencils and paperclips in her hair, had slowly become a victim of her textbooks and notebooks, while Brandon became the early riser that he'd dreaded, became the coffee-drinker, a slave to the morning commute, and slowly began to miss the days that Natalie had the time to cook him breakfast. They were the kind of adults that they'd been wary of their entire young lives, became a true vision of their parents, in their worst form.

The weekends brought them solace; it seemed the only time that they actually got to talk to each other the way that they used to. They'd admit that they missed each other, she, missing the way that he'd hold her, missing the way that they talked, missing the way that they fought. Natalie cried one Sat-

urday and he felt guilty; he'd lost his talent when it came to consoling her, when it came to assuring her that everything would turn out all right.

As much as they piled on him at work day by day, he didn't know how to handle his job of being a husband. By the turn of the New Year, he knew that he was neglecting his wife, his duties, his love as much as she was...

By February, they'd stopped having sex, even on the weekends. Before, he could count on being with Natalie on Friday night and on Saturday night to make up for the lost time, and although it was physically fulfilling, they both knew that they'd lost the mental connection that they once had, and they both weren't sure where it went...

By March, Brandon couldn't remember the last that he'd told her that he loved her. He also couldn't remember the last time that he heard her say it either.

They both acted completely unfazed by it, as he would rather have worried about his presentation the next day, and she, about whatever examination she had. It was as if the incident of "baby" had cursed them...

If they hadn't have ignored the subject, could their first year of marriage been salvaged?

Possibly...

By summer's start, they didn't know what to say to each other anymore...

On the nights that Natalie did attempt to make dinner, they'd simply sit at the small kitchen table, in severe silence,

picking at their plates, pushing food from side to side, sighing uncontrollably.

On a tepid night in July, as they lay in bed, Natalie straddled him slowly, tugged at the collar of his undershirt, kissing just below his chin. He pushed her away. All he could think about was work the next day, about having to get up extra early to help the boss fix some spreadsheet disaster that the secretary had worked on the week prior. Natalie curled into a ball, and cried softly till she fell asleep.

His mother called him at the end of the month. He was stunned and he couldn't remember the last time that he'd talked to her.

"Brandon," she said quietly, her voice sounding weak. "How have you been?"

He most certainly wasn't going to tell her that his life was shit, and that everyday, he thought about running away. After all, this was the life he'd chosen, right? She most certainly didn't want to hear from her that she was right all along, that Natalie might have been the wrong girl. The wrong girl? Brandon was shaken that he could have thought such a thing...nevertheless, allowing the mother to see his defenselessness would never happen.

"I'm fine, Mother, and yourself?"

"Not so good," she said, her voice trailing off. "It's your grandmother, sweetheart..."

"Yes?"

"She passed away this morning..."

Margaret Abbott spent most of her life, living in a Cape style cottage, in Chilmark, on Martha's Vineyard (Martha Greene's namesake), that overlooked quiet Menemsha. Old Maggie's husband, Richard, built the edifice sometime in the mid-1940s, just after they'd married, and shortly following the birth of their first child, Cecilia.

Brandon didn't remember much about his grandmother from his childhood, except for the times that she'd slap his hands for saying "Jesus Christ" in front of her, or when he fought with his brothers. Hell, the last time he could remember being on the Vineyard was when he was nine, for his grandfather's funeral, where his mother and her three sisters, sprinkled his cremated remains in the sound, under a warm, September setting sun. Afterward, his aunt Cecilia served cod fish and tea at her home in Oak Bluffs.

Seeing his grandmother's corpse in the open casket in the living room of the house, a couple of weeks before his twenty-eighth birthday marked approximately ten times he'd seen her in his entire life, including when she lived at the nursing home in Albany. He didn't attempt to hide the unaffected expression on his face, looking at the body, her wrinkled hands crossed. She still wore her wedding ring. He'd remembered what she'd said to Natalie at dinner just days before his parent's anniversary almost two years prior. How he'd hated her then, how he'd hated seeing his fiancée cry that way.

He glanced back at Natalie, who sat on the couch with the other two young Greene wives, wearing a black dress that he hadn't seen before, that made her look homely, that made her look far older than her twenty-three year old heart.

They met eyes for a fleeting moment, and a slant of sunlight from the bay window bathed her cheeks. She then turned her eyes away and lowered them, pretending to pick something from her dress.

They didn't say much to each other on the flight to the island. She didn't look at him much, and when he tried to reach for her hand, she pulled away and glared at him, as if his touch were foreign, unwanted.

They shared one of the Abbott children's old bedrooms, with his brothers and their families, sharing whichever room they could find, and when Natalie opted to take a nap following the wake, he left the room, headed down the stairs and out onto the sun porch, where he found his mother, crying.

He cautiously sat down next to her on the wrought iron chair, and waited till she composed herself. Though his anger still lingered, nothing made his stomach turn worse than seeing his mother cry.

"Where has my life gone?" she said quietly, looking at him.

He didn't answer. He was too busy answering that question for himself.

"Where has my life gone?" she repeated, as he caught an escaped tear.

He still said nothing. He only thought about Natalie, looked out toward the sound, twinkling in the sun, through patches of drying stalks of sea oats, while he attempted to settle his anger that boiled inside of him.

He then put his arm around his mother, felt her fragility, attempted to simmer her trembling.

"I have missed you," she whispered, burying her face in the lapel of his blazer.

He'd missed her too. But he remained silent.

"I've been foolish..."

He agreed. He allowed some of the anger to subside.

"Forgive me, my son," she wept silently. "Forgive me..."

He couldn't then, but he promised that he would one day. He kissed the top of his mother's head and looked out toward the water...

Yes, one day.

She kept replaying the moment in her head; the moment that Brandon refused her. She couldn't help but think that she now disgusted him in some way, that every moment that he looked at her, he'd curl his lip, planning his escape.

She would let him go if he so pleased! Why bother with her feelings anymore? She'd failed her past two examinations, had spent all night studying for both, and when she needed some comfort, he'd turned his eyes away.

She thought about tossing her ring to the wind at the wake just to get his attention. Would he have cared? Or would he have turned the other cheek? She wasn't sure anymore.

Joanna told her that she'd lost her glow. Was she ready to admit that she'd fallen out of love? Would that have been too hasty?

Looking at him today made her believe that they weren't meant to be...

Her uncertainty pushed her to believe that he wished he were with someone else...

She was ready to pull out of this if he was. It would only prove her mother to be right! It wasn't too late for them to go on with their lives. She'd done it before; she could definitely do it again.

She awoke from her nap with a frightful headache, raised her head and body to darkness, the sound of crickets crying and the current beneath the bedroom window undulating. Brandon still hadn't returned.

She swung her feet to the floor, reached for her brown sandals from her duffel bag, and headed out the door. She roamed through the quiet house, a whistling draft following her, coursed through shadows from the remains of sunset, the worn floor, creaking beneath her step, and down the main staircase, and out the front screen door. She ambled down a pathway of grainy, golden sand, the sky, a holding place for

stretches of ambers, cool periwinkles, crimson and emerging stars...

The breeze, swift and light swept through her legs, across her cheeks, through her dark, coarse hair, and continued before her, towards the sound. She pushed through a bevy of sea oats, ascended and descended slick grey rocks, and found a home on a bed of sand that stretched farther than her eyes could see.

And she looked toward the horizon...

Brandon knelt, his knees buried in the sand, his head lowered...

She withdrew slightly, crossing her arms at her chest, lowering her eyes.

She knew that this wasn't right, and she questioned the course her short life had taken. She knew that she was better than this...

She knew that they were better than this...

She walked toward him. She tried to breathe. Suddenly, she was nineteen again, writhing under an alien feeling...

She knelt before him, breathed in his proximity and felt a lump rise in her throat. She'd missed his smell, missed his nearness, missed the color of his hair, the way it felt against her cheek, the way the sky looked in his presence, the way the breeze felt against her skin...

She placed her hands on his knees slowly. He raised his head. She'd missed the way his blue gaze exposed every sensation within her.

And a tear glided down her brown cheek. And for the first time in months, she felt her heart beat...

She lifted a hand cautiously extended it toward his face as another tear fell. She'd forgotten the feel of his skin, forgotten how warm he felt...

He touched her hand and rolled his eyes closed.

"Brandon..." she whimpered, as the tears caught hold of her voice.

He pulled her into him swiftly, their foreheads touched gingerly, igniting every lost sensation, every lost memory, every lost moment...

She pressed her fingers to his chest and closed her eyes.

"I'm weak," she whispered to him.

He nodded in accord.

"We're married," she said quietly, partially to herself.

"We're married..."

He pinched her chin, tilted her face upward and pressed his lips against hers. Natalie savored the taste, the warmth, the wetness...

And when they parted, she whispered, "I'm not giving up...I'm not giving up on us..."

"Never," he replied quietly, kissing her again...

That night, when Natalie stood before him in the bedroom that they shared and started to unbutton his knit shirt, he didn't stop her. He lifted her up, laid her down on the bed and he made love to her, the kind they were both certain they hadn't had since their honeymoon, the kind where he buried his face in Natalie's neck, the kind where he writhed under her stifled whimpers and thighs, clenching against him, the kind that made them both sorry for their actions, for their strange thoughts. How dare they think that nothing thrived between them anymore? How quick they were to forget their past, their connection, their exertion to be together.

They'd loved each other since they lurked around the pond in the dead of night at the end of Trent Road; they'd wanted each other since they skirted the waves off of Jekyll Island, since they waded in Lake Hartwell beneath the moon.

Natalie slid a pan of chocolate cake batter into the oven the morning of August fifteenth. It was Brandon's favorite and she thought it just the thing to cheer him up, and help him forget about the fact that he was one year closer to turning thirty, something he dreaded more than anything. Her hope was that she'd initiate sex as a birthday present that morning, but she hadn't felt up to it.

Her body was just too tired.

The night before, they'd gone to Harrell's for dinner, and when she returned to the house, she'd thrown up the entire contents of her meal. The remainder of the night, she'd felt

nauseous, and found herself, running in and out of the bathroom with Brandon trailing close behind her.

“Was it the fish?” he’d asked her, holding her close in the bathroom. Sure, for now, she’d write the illness off as temporary. Food poisoning.

She’d awakened that morning with the same empty feeling in her stomach, and she only hoped that the feeling would subside in time for the dinner she’d planned for her husband and Asha and Scotty. Brandon wanted nothing more, he’d said, than to spend his twenty-eighth birthday with his closest friends, and his wife.

Brandon entered the kitchen, wearing nothing more than boxers and sleep-filled eyes.

“Hello there, baby,” she said, greeting him with a smile. “How does it feel to be twenty-eight?”

“Natalie...” he whined.

“What? Is that an inappropriate question?”

He didn’t answer, only lurched toward the refrigerator, peering into it while he scratched his belly.

“I’m baking you a cake,” she told him, placing a hand to her hip.

“You feel well enough to do that?” he asked her, popping open a carton of orange juice to drink. “I mean, after last night?”

Natalie sighed. “Well, I suppose I do...besides it’s your birthday...I can skip out on your birthday, can I?”

“Tal, I think you should be laying down...”

“Brandon, I’m fine...” she assured him, setting the timer on the cake.

“I can bake a cake, you know...”

“You shouldn’t do anything on your birthday but rest... you deserve it...”

“Fine...but if you feel the slightest headache or stomach-ache...you’re going to bed, you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied with a grin and a mock salute.

Scotty and Asha arrived around noon, entering a house of walls painted in pale greens, soft blues and yellows, abundant sunshine, and cream-colored furniture. They each hugged their married friends, and later, while Natalie started to prepare dinner, Brandon decided to show Scotty around the town.

Natalie showed Asha to the back deck, overlooking a humble backyard, with short trees and drying grass. Jack Greene had stained the wood planks of the deck himself, and Natalie was particularly proud of the wrought iron outdoor furniture set she’d found at such a reasonable price. She was more than anxious to use the backyard more often, and she couldn’t have thought of a better occasion than Brandon’s birthday.

Asha placed her hands at her hips, took a deep breath, gazing out into the small plain of grass.

“Wow, Nat,” she breathed. “It looks great out here. It’s so quiet and peaceful, and private...”

Natalie followed Asha’s gaze and sighed. “Yea, I know...”

Asha turned to look at her friend and grinned. “And you’re married...you’re really married...”

“I know,” Natalie replied, smiling back.

Natalie couldn’t believe it as much as Asha couldn’t. She couldn’t believe that they’d survived a year, though she was sure at some points she wouldn’t have. Since their turn on the Vineyard, things returned to some semblance of normalcy, and she even began to appreciate her husband and his quirks as easily as she’d done when they first married. It made her realize how foolish they’d been, how crazily they’d acted, how rash her thoughts were of their situation. She’d spent the past few days, gazing at her husband the way she’d done over the past seven years; she was confident that she’d always love him, as she’d loved him for those years. She was confident of the future, confident that she’d always need him; always value his smile in her direction, the strength and appearance of his hands, his enveloping touch. She was as confident now as she had been the moment that they sat on the dock, their feet submerged into Lake Hartwell, inferior to the stars in the sky, knowing that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, so much so, that it scared her.

She regained the happiness she’d known and felt dearly when she was seventeen, and all the world was known to her...

Natalie sat down on the patio furniture with her girl, her confidant, her partner in crime, and she appreciated her; she appreciated her patience, her loyalty, her laughter when Natalie felt like crying, for understanding her and her thoughts

when she was sure than no one else did, for pushing her to express her feelings for Brandon, when she was sure that she couldn’t...

“You look different,” Asha remarked speculatively, looking at her with an arched eyebrow.

Natalie could recall the last time that Asha sensed a change in her; Natalie was eighteen, and she’d just come back from attending a party in the neighborhood adjacent to Brandon’s house. He’d held her hand lingeringly as they coursed through the house, her in tow, as Brandon spoke to his friends, as he sipped on a can of beer, protecting her, whispering, “Come on, Nat, keep up.” Her heart raced the entire time...

Natalie remained silent as Asha studied her face.

“What is it, girl?” she’d asked, flopping her back against the seat, crossing her arms. “Tell me what it is...”

Natalie took a deep breath, closed her eyes in a fleeting moment, reopened them and murmured, “I’ve got a secret...”

Asha nodded, cleared her throat and replied, “I know...”

Seven years. He couldn’t remember a moment in that passage of time when he didn’t love her. Sometimes he’d question why he did so much, why he needed her so much. Something about looking at her soothed him. Often, she simply looked so at peace, so content with her life, so graceful, so comely...

He couldn’t help but love her, want her, need her...

There was always a part of him that felt he needed to protect her, to cover her, to shield her. Her ingenuousness still pre-

vailed, even after so long, and to this day, this very moment, it still perplexed him, still, to the point that he got lost in it, succumbed to it.

He would always succumb to her...

She'd grilled seasoned steaks, corn on the cob and had tossed a fresh salad for him. When he offered his help, she refused.

"Sit down, you silly thing," she'd told him, flipping a steak with one hand and slapping him on the butt with another.

He couldn't wait to tell her the idea he'd concocted in his mind. He thought it pure genius. Yes! It was just the thing to secure their future happiness. Natalie would no longer look at him with disappointment.

They sat down together on the deck as the sun began to set, as twilight surfaced and the branches of the trees created a natural aural symphony. It was always the time of day

that brought him serenity; it was when he spent the most time at the pond; it was always the time that reminded him most of Natalie. He was always confident that if he sat still enough, embraced the air, that he'd sense her, prevailing as she coursed through his mind...

"May I propose a toast?" Asha said, dropping her fork and lifting her glass.

"Yes," Scotty said. "If you can keep it short...you know how you are..."

"And how am I, Scotland? Please, interrupt me some more..."

"Asha," Natalie said. "Ignore him..."

"Fine," Asha said, clearing her throat. "As I was saying...Brandon David Greene...you're like a brother to me...you're giving, you're funny, and you're still the coolest white boy that I know [they laughed]. Happy twenty-eighth birthday, my darling...I love you...we love you...and we hope Nat gives you some sweet lovin' tonight..."

"Thanks, Ash," Brandon said, feeling himself blush. "I hope so too..."

"We'll see about all of that," Natalie said, glancing at him with a wink.

Brandon replaced his bottle of beer on the wrought iron table, cleared his throat and said, "I'm glad you all are here...I have something to say..."

"What's that?" Asha said, leaning into the table.

He looked at Natalie, hoping that she didn't dump her plate of food in his lap. He studied her expression, reached for her hand and said, "Baby..."

"Yes?" she replied quietly.

She almost looked too happy. He retracted for a moment and he rubbed her hand as he contemplated saying what he had to say...

"I quit my job..."

He watched her face do something funny, and he was certain that he'd make her throw up again. But he continued. "I love you," he said. "And any job that keeps me from you isn't the right job for me..."

They only stared at each other. He watched her swallow whatever contents were in her mouth. Her eyes flitted and fluttered witlessly.

“Say something, baby,” he encouraged, still rubbing her hand.

She swallowed hard again, sucked in her breath and whispered, “Happy Birthday, Brandy...I dropped out of medical school...and...I’m...I’m pregnant...”

About the Author

*When Jade Alyse is not spending her nights succumbing to the only passion she's ever known, she's a graduate student, studying Creative Writing. She is also the proud author of her second novel, **Kiawah** and three short stories.*

*Her third short story, **The Trail's End**, will be released in October, 2012.*

