

LAUREN BARNHOLDT & AARON GORVINE

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black off-the-shoulder corset-style dress with a full skirt and long black gloves, stands in a field of tall grass. The background is a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise over a distant horizon.

# The Witches of Santa Anna

THE COMPLETE SET

# **THE WITCHES OF SANTA ANNA**

## **THE COMPLETE SET – SEASON ONE**

**(Books 1,2,3,4,5,6,7)**

**Includes CLAIMED, TRICKED, RUMORED, HUSHED,  
PURSUED, ENTICED, and RUINED**

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved

This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is  
entirely coincidental

### **CLAIMED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book 1)**

**by Lauren Barnholdt & Aaron Gorvine**

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead,  
is a coincidence.



# Chapter One

## Natalia

Here's how my first day of school at Santa Anna is supposed to go: 1. I will cruise effortlessly through the halls, never once getting lost, misplacing my schedule, or embarrassing myself in any way.

2. I will meet a boy who will fall madly in love with me. (Think Edward from Twilight, but without that whole weird there's-a-vampire-staring-at-me-while-I-sleep thing. So I guess think Robert Pattison. Which would actually be perfect, since I'm English. Well, sort of. I grew up in England, but I've been in the US ever since I was ten. I still have a tiny bit of an accent, which people usually think is cool, so sometimes I try to play it up and make it more pronounced than it actually is. I figure if it worked for Madonna, it should work for me.)

3. I will hook up with a new crowd of amazing friends that will become my friends for life. These girls will be into girly things like nail polish and lip gloss, but will also read and be concerned about the environment. They won't have boyfriends. (Well. I'm flexible on this one. They can have boyfriends if a) It doesn't interfere with the time they spend with me and/or b) their boyfriends are friends with my boyfriend, aka fake Robert Pattison.)

Unfortunately, I'm not off to a great start if I want to make this fantasy day of school a reality, because right now I'm standing in the front hallway of school, looking around, totally lost, unable to find my locker or my homeroom. There's a run in my tights, my hair is slightly frizzy because even though it's October it's still a million degrees out, and my stomach is churning because I'm so anxious.

At least didn't have to worry about what I was going to wear. Santa Anna is a private school, which means we all have to wear the same thing – white shirt, red and blue plaid skirt, tights, and flat black shoes. (I really don't know how Blair

Waldorf makes her school uniform look so fashionable. It's probably all the headbands. Which I so cannot pull off.)

"Do you need help finding your locker?" a girl next to me asks.

"Is it that obvious?" I say, giving her a grateful look.

"Nah," she says. She readjusts her bag on her shoulder and smiles at me sheepishly. "Well, kind of."

"I'm going to have to work on not looking so lost." I force my features into a bright smile. "How's that?"

"Hmm," she says, "That looks a little more like a creepy serial killer than a girl who's not lost."

I tone it down a little. "Better?"

"Perfect," she says, "But just to warn you, this is a small school. People are going to know you're new blood. Even with the new smile."

"Great," I say. I glance back down at my schedule. "I'm trying to find locker 2127. I thought it would be on the second floor but apparently not."

"Nope," she says, "All the junior classrooms and lockers are downstairs." I follow her as she navigates through the tangle of laughing, happy students (who all seem to know each other, fyi), until finally we head down a stairway into some other wing. A wing where finally the lockers all start with the number two.

"Here you go," she says with a flourish, "Number 2127." She puts her hands up and presents it like it's a game show prize.

"Oh, thank God," I say, "And it's a top locker. Bonus."

“I’m Adrianna,” my new BFF says.

“Natalia.”

“So you just moved here?”

“Nope,” I say, “Transferred. From Woodburne Public.”

She looks at me, and her eyebrows shoot up. Probably she’s used to girls showing up here as transfer students. Probably they come because of all sorts of nefarious reasons, like drugs and secret pregnancies and criminal records. She opens her mouth, like maybe she wants to say something else, but she must see something in my eyes that lets her know I don’t want to talk about it, because finally, all she says is, “Well, you can find me at lunch if you want. All the juniors have second lunch.”

“Thanks,” I say gratefully.

“No prob.” The bell rings then, and she gives me a wave before turning on her flat but fashionable shiny flat black pump and walking away.

I take a deep breath and then pull out the piece of paper they sent us over the summer, the one that lists our homeroom, our locker number, and our locker combo.

Everything in this school looks shiny and new – the overhead lights, the gleaming marble floors, the two statues of lions (the school’s mascot) that flank the outside stairs – and so my locker pops right open on the first try.

I load my things into it, wondering if the girls here carry their purses around with them or leave them in their lockers. A quick glance around tells me it’s about half and half, and so I grab mine and sling it over my shoulder, then slam my locker

door shut.

And realize too late that the paper with my schedule and my combination on it is still in there. I try to grab it before the door slams shut, but all I end up doing is nicking my finger on the ventilation slats at the top. “Shit, shit, shit!” I swear, and shove the tip of my finger into my mouth. A quick glance shows me it’s not bleeding, but it’s all red and hurts like hell.

Ugh, ugh, ugh. Now I’m going to have to walk into homeroom and ask the teacher for my locker combination. How completely humiliating. There will probably be kids in there, sitting at the desks, and it will be all quiet because it always is when you have something embarrassing to say to a teacher, and they’ll hear me and --- ugh. It’s best not to think about it. I lean my head against the cool metal of the locker, and after a few deep breaths. I turn around, ready to walk into my homeroom and face the music.

And that’s when I notice him. The hottest guy I’ve ever seen, standing across the hall, staring at me.





# Chapter Two

## Campbell

“Dude, you know you’re going to have a threesome, right?” That’s what Aiden says to me after I’m done talking with Raine and her two friends, Becca and Teri.

I’m still watching the three of them as they saunter down the hallway, their asses swaying from side to side like only hot girls can pull off.

“Did you even hear what I just said, Campbell?”

I finally pull my gaze away from the girls and look at Aiden. He’s like five inches shorter than me so I have to look down at him. “I heard you, I heard you,” I say.

“And?”

“And what?” I grab my books out of my locker and slam it shut.

“You do realize this will be the best thing that’s ever happened to you—to any of us—in our whole lives...”

I start walking and Aiden trots along at my side, still yapping.

“I don’t see what you or anyone else has to do with it,” I tell him.

“Shit, Brody is going to freak when he hears about this.”

“There’s nothing to hear.” I stop and gently push him toward the wall near the bathrooms. “And you’re not going to start talking a bunch of shit either.”

“Dude, I HEARD her. Raine. She asked you to hang out, just you and them, this weekend. At—“

“I know. I was there. Remember? But it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Right.” Aiden’s smile turns into a pumpkin grin. He gives me a crazy wink. “I get it. Say no more.”

“No, you don’t get it Aiden. If—IF—I choose to go hang with Raine and her friends, that’s my business.” We start walking again. Of course, I’m not going to admit to Aiden that I had the very same thought he did. Not necessarily about a threesome. But definitely about at least a twosome. Either way, the best way to ruin my chances with Raine would be to let a rumor start spreading around school before anything even happens.

“I wish I had ten percent of your luck,” Aiden says.

“Or five percent of my brains.”

“Somehow I don’t think your brains are the reason Raine Marsden wants to hang out with you this weekend.”

“What are you, ten years old? They probably want to watch New Moon or something and paint each other’s nails while I sit there and pretend to give a shit.”

“Uh-huh.”

The truth is, I don’t know what Raine’s sudden interest in me is all about. But I can remember when it started. A few weeks before school, I saw her and Becca and Teri hanging out by the football field during double sessions. They were just kind of strolling around the fence, laughing, talking and occasionally yelling stuff at us as Coach Walker kicked our asses up and down the field. Eventually Coach told them to leave because they were “distracting” the players. More like, he was probably getting an uncontrollable woody from them himself.

Anyway, after practice mercifully ended for the day, I was heading to my car when Raine stopped me and asked me where I'd been all summer. I answered that I'd been up in Maine at my dad's house, same as always. Then she asked me if I realized I'd gotten more built over the last year.

"All the girls are starting to talk about you. Those workouts must be paying off," she'd said. She reached out and squeezed my bicep.

That was the beginning. From then on, it's like I keep running into her and her friends...at the movie theatre, at Royal's ice cream, even the supermarket one time.

"Bring me with you, dude, please," Aiden begs, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"It's not even going to happen. Forget about it," I tell him.

"At least promise you'll tell me all the details."

"Fine. I'll tell you everything. You can write it all down and publish the tell-all book," I say as we make our way downstairs to the junior hall.

Aiden claps his hands. "Yes! That could make me a rich man. And then the ladies definitely won't be able to resist me."

But I've stopped listening to Aiden because out of nowhere I see this girl—dark hair, pale skin—standing by herself. She looks confused. She's wringing her hand like she hurt it. She leans her head against her locker. She's probably new. She's probably lost or has the wrong locker or whatever other stupid shit people do when they're in a new place and disoriented.

I know I should ask if she needs help, but honestly, I don't want to get involved.

I'm already in trouble for being late to homeroom all the time, and if it happens again, Mr. Alm is going to tell Coach Walker, and then I'll have to run suicides, which I really hate because –

Shit. The girl turns around, and catches me looking at her. Our eyes meet across the hall, and now if I walk by, she'll think I'm a complete and total dick.

Shit, shit, shit. "I'll catch you at lunch," I tell Aiden. And then I walk over to the girl with the hurt finger. This better be quick.

## **. Chapter Three**

### **Natalia**

Great. Now the hot guy is coming over. What is it about hot guys always thinking they have to get involved? It's like they think they have to rescue you or something. And he's definitely hot. Dark hair. Dark skin. Very...smoldering. And probably a complete asshole.

I sigh and turn away from him, deciding to pretend that everything's fine. I try my locker combo one more time, figuring I'll wait until he passes by before heading into room 212 and trying to obtain my locker combination. Nothing to see here, la la la.

But there's a tap on my shoulder, and I know it's him before I even turn around.

Sigh.

"Hey," he says, flashing a perfect smile.

I swallow. Hard. He's even more gorgeous close up. And he smells amazing,

"Hi."

“Something wrong with your locker?”

“Um, no,” I say.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” My throat is suddenly dry and I lick my lips.

“Because I happen to be an expert at lockers.” He leans against the one next to mine and the side of his mouth twists up into a cocky grin. “In fact they’re kind of like my specialty.”

“Spoken like a true thief,” I say.

“Not thief,” he corrects, “Borrower.”

“And what sorts of things do you borrow?”

“Whatever I want,” he says, and grins again. Ugh. He must be able to tell by my face that stealing things is less than sexy (well, at least my brain is thinking it’s less than sexy – my body is responding in an entirely different way, thank you very much), because he shakes his head like I can’t take a joke (which is so not true – I have a fabulous sense of humor, thank you very much) and says, “No, but seriously. My dad has a locksmith company. Which is why I’m good with locks.”

I think about this, and decide it’s probably a lie. I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time a hot boy has lied to me. But beggars can’t be choosers, and I really need to get into my locker. So I step aside, “Be my guest,” I say. His chest brushes against me as I move by him, and I feel a jolt of electricity shoot through my body.

He puts his ear up against the metal, holds his finger to his lips for me to be quiet (like I was going to say anything anyway) and turns the dial slowly. After a few seconds, he pulls away, then turns the lock, and pops open the locker. “There you

go,” he says.

“Wow,” I say. “Impressive.” I pull out my schedule and locker combination, then slam it shut. “So how do I know that you’re not going to ‘borrow’ from me now that you know my combination?”

“I have a horrible memory,” he says, “And so I’ve already forgotten it.”

“Even if that’s true,” I say, “You could easily figure it out again.”

“Good point,” he says, “But I can figure out anyone’s locker combination in the whole school. What makes your think yours is so special?”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say, feeling myself blush.

“And besides, don’t you trust me?”

“Why would I trust you? I don’t even know your name.”

“Because I’m very trustworthy.” He grins again, and then holds his hand out.

“And my name’s Campbell. Campbell Elliott.”

“Natalia Moore,” I say, and take his hand. That same shot of electricity flows up my arm, and I feel like it’s not my imagination that he holds my hand a second longer than necessary.

“So what’s – ” I start, but I’m interrupted. By a girl. A very good-looking girl.

A very skinny good-looking girl, with long blonde hair and perfect skin.

“Cam,” she says, “I forgot to tell you that we might have to meet at Becca’s first, because – ” she cuts off when she sees us. He’s still holding my hand, and I drop it

quickly.

Cam grins, I guess because he can tell I'm uncomfortable. My hand feels like it's on fire, and I wipe it on my skirt.

"Oh," the girl says, "I didn't know there was a new girl." She says "new girl" the way you'd say "oh, I didn't know there was gum stuck on my shoe."

"Is it that obvious?" I ask for the second time today. Only this time my tone is a little more clipped.

"Sort of." She smiles at me tightly. "Everyone knows everyone here, so if you're new, you stick out." I wait for her to add something comforting like 'but don't worry you'll fit right in' or 'it's okay though I'll show you around.' But all she says is, "I'm Raine."

"Natalia," I say. "And starting a new school where everyone knows each other?"

Sounds perfect."

It must come out more pathetic than sarcastic, because Cam says, "Ah, Raine's just being dramatic. You'll be fine. In fact, we were just talking about hanging out tomorrow night. You up for it?"

I see the look that passes across Raine's face. The look that says she doesn't really want me there. But she recovers quickly and says, "Totally. You should come.

Find me at lunch and I'll give you the deets." She turns to Cam. "I'll text you." And then she kisses him on the cheek and takes off down the hall.

I watch her go, wondering what's going on between the two of them. They're obviously not together, because she wouldn't have been hanging out with him in a

group on a Friday night. On the other hand, she did kiss him on the cheek, so... she must be interested, right? But is he? I'm not sure. He's too hard to read. Not like it matters. I have my own problems to worry about.

The bell rings then, and Campbell turns around and starts heading down the hall.

He walks backwards, staring at me as he goes. "Catch you later, Brit," he says.

"My name's Natalia," I yell after him.

But he just grins and keeps going. And then I get it. He's calling me Brit because of my accent. I sigh, then readjust my purse and head into homeroom.





# Chapter Four

## Campbell

I'm about to take a jump shot when an all-too familiar voice calls out from nearby.

"Pass it, pass it!"

I stop and pump-fake the ball instead of making the shot even though I had an open look.

Brody waves his arms. "Hey, I'm open—what are you, blind?"

I throw a blisteringly fast pass right at Brody's chest but someone from the opposite team picks it off.

Brody glares at me.

I glare back at him.

Aiden comes up and pats me on the shoulder. "Nice try, Kobe."

"Shut up." I shrug him off.

"It's only gym class," Aiden says as I keep walking up the court. The other team has just scored an easy layup.

Brody runs toward me. "What the hell, man? I was so open."

"I missed a perfect shot because of you," I tell him.

"Since when are you a shooter?" he says.

Brody's a pain in the ass but I keep him around because once in a while he can be pretty cool. Like, he's the one who convinced me to start playing football, he helped me sort out my gym routine and got me on all the right supplements and stuff. But then he kind of gets a big head about it and always talks about how he's the reason coach is giving me so much playing time this year. Which is bullshit.

"If I see a shot I'm taking it," I say.

"You can take a shot, but not the FINAL shot. That's reserved for people who are great under pressure, like me," Brody says. "You best remember that, son."

"Guys, can we stop arguing about a gym class b-ball game and focus on the important stuff?" Aiden says.

"Like what?" I reply. Of course he's talking about The Triad. Raine and company.

"Did you tell him yet?" Aiden asks Brody. Brody just looks at me with a knowing smile.

"Did he tell me what yet?" I ask, instantly suspicious.

Brody grins. "Most random thing ever. Becca Knowles asked me to hang out with her and her friends tomorrow. At Raine's place."

"Really." I fold my arms.

"Yup. Guess I must be the hot ticket around here."

The game is over and all the kids are heading to the locker room so we follow along.

Aiden nudges me.

I glare at him.

He nudges me again. “Now it’s your turn to spill the beans.”

I sigh. “Fine. Raine asked me to come over to her place tomorrow, too.”

Brody’s confident smile slowly fades as he takes it in. “You?”

“Why not me?”

“I don’t know. You just don’t seem like Raine’s type.”

We get to our lockers and start changing back into our school uniforms. White shirt with the school crest embroidered in the left pocket, gold and blue ties, navy blue pants and black dress shoes.

“You guys are both totally missing the point here,” Aiden says. “We’re in!”

“Ummm, last I checked you had nothing to do with any of this,” I tell him, straightening my tie. Brody pulls the back of my collar down for me.

“Of course I do,” Aiden says. “Everyone knows that we’re a team, just like Raine and Becca and Teri. We’re the male triad.”

“Bullshit we are.”

“Come on, take me with you.”

“I don’t even know if I’m going,” I say.

“You’re going,” Brody says. “You can’t turn down Raine, man. You’d be the biggest screw up in history if you didn’t try and see what was up with that. She’s the hottest girl in the whole school—the whole damn town.” He shakes his head. “I still can’t

believe she asked you to go. What the hell is this world coming to?"

It's sort of an unspoken agreement among all guys that Raine is the best looking, most popular girl in town. She's considered untouchable, like if Taylor Swift actually came and moved to Randolph. And started attending Santa Anna.

The bell rings, and we rush out of the locker room, Brody and Aiden splitting off to go to Chemistry class while I have a study period.

When I get to my classroom, the new girl's there. Natalia. Sitting in the back row of the room, reading some book. Just leave well enough alone, I tell myself. Leave HER alone and focus on studying. But I don't really feel like studying. There's an empty seat next to her, and before I know it, I'm going right over and sitting down.

Her eyes shift and widen for a split second when she sees me, and then she goes right back to reading. I get a little kick out of seeing her react when I just sit down next to her.

I crane my neck to get a glimpse of the cover. "What's that?"

She looks up. "What?" She stirs as if suddenly uncomfortable, takes the book and puts it back in her purse.

"Why'd you put it away?"

"Because. You were being nosy."

I snort. "Just curious. Is that like a crime or something?" She shrugs, so I try a different tact. "Hey, you want to know something?" I fake whisper, like I'm letting her in on some big secret.

"What?" she fake whispers back.

I lean in. "Don't tell anyone this. But I like to read, too."

"Sure you do." She laughs like she doesn't believe me, but it's true. I like reading scary books. Horror and zombie type stuff. But still. It counts as reading even if it's not Charles Dickens.

"Anyway, are you really coming to Raine's house tomorrow?" I say, changing the subject.

She shrugs and runs a hand through her dark hair, tucks it behind one ear, thinks for a bit. "I don't know if they really want me to go."

"Of course they do. We all do." I'm not sure why I said that. I mean, I don't care all that much if she goes. But it might be funny to see what she's like outside of school.

Now she flashes a real smile. "You think?"

"I do. In fact, I'll even pick you up and give you a ride."

She hesitates. Which is good, actually. I mean, giving her a ride might not be the best idea if I'm planning to try and hook up with Raine. I've got to stop being such a nice guy and just let it be.

"Okay," she says after a long moment. "I'll go."

"Cool. It should be fun." There's a second of silence, and now I'm wishing I hadn't said anything about going together. What will Brody and Aiden think when they find out?

I sit back in my chair and Natalia starts twirling her hair around one finger. Then I glance down at her purse and happen to notice the title of that book she was reading when I first came in. I almost fall out of my chair.

I start pointing at the book. “Wait a second—“

“What?”

“You can’t—“

She looks down at her purse, mystified. “What? What?”

“That book! That’s like, my favorite book of all time.”

She reaches down and closes her purse. “You shouldn’t snoop.”

“I wasn’t snooping, it was staring me in the face.”

“Shhh!” she says. “People are looking.” And they are, too. Tanya Hawk is giving us a dirty look, and Mrs. Johnson, our teacher, raises her eyebrows at us. I sit back and shake my head. “Sorry,” I whisper, “I just can’t believe you’re reading Day By Day Armageddon.”

“Shhh. Don’t announce it to the whole class!”

I lower my voice. “Girls don’t read zombie books. I mean, maybe Pride and Prejudice and Zombies or something...”

“That is a completely sexist statement,” she says, “And I don’t appreciate it. Not every girl is exactly the same.”

“Guess not,” I say.

She gives me another of her funny little smiles. And suddenly I’m glad that we decided to go to the party together.





# Chapter Five

## Natalia

“What do you know about Campbell?” I ask Adrianna at lunch. When I walked into the cafeteria, I saw Raine sitting at a table with a couple of other girls, and I know this morning she told me to find her at lunch so she could give me the info about hanging out, but there was no way I was actually going to do it. So when I saw Adrianna over at another table, I immediately glommed onto her. I mean, she’d invited me to sit with her this morning, and I figured risking humiliation by assuming she meant it was better than being the loser that was sitting alone on her first day of school.

“Campbell Elliott?” Adrianna asks. She trades a look with her friend Chelsey who’s also at our table.

“Forget it,” Chelsey says, obviously not into the idea of sparing people’s feelings.

“Everyone wants him. He, like, came back from summer vacation even hotter than before, and rumor has it he’s had sex with like, seven girls since the beginning of the year.”

“And besides, Raine Marsden likes him,” Adrianna says. She points to Raine.

“And if Raine wants him, she’ll get him.”

“Raine gets everything she wants,” Chelsey says, sighing.

Hmm. I look over to where Raine is sitting. She pushes her long blonde hair back from her face and giggles at something that one of her friends is saying. She catches my eye, and I look away. But before I do, for some reason a shiver starts at the bottom of my toes and slides all the way up my spine.

“Hey, don’t feel bad,” Adrianna says, seeing the look on my face. She forks up a piece of lettuce from her cobb salad. “Cam’s off limits. But there are a ton of hot guys who aren’t.”

“What are you talking about?” Chelsey says, “No, they’re aren’t.” She turns to me. “This school is sixty percent girls, forty percent boys. Which means the odds are not in our favor.”

“How do you even know that?” Adrianna asks.

“I looked it up when I was working in the office last year.”

“They have that kind of information in the office?” I ask.

“Well, they have the class lists broken down by male and female,” Chelsey says, shrugging. “And after that, it’s easy to come up with a ratio.”

“Don’t listen to her, Natalia,” Adrianna says. “There are plenty of guys here.”

“Like Luke Janefri?” Chelsey asks with a sly smile.

Adrianna blushes. “What’s the deal?” I ask.

“We went out last weekend,” she says, “And I think we’re hanging out again this weekend.”

“He didn’t even kiss her,” Chelsey reports. “Which probably means he’s gay.”

“Chelsey!” Adrianna exclaims.

“What? You were wearing red high heels! Nothing says ‘I want you to get me naked’ more than fuck me heels. And he didn’t even kiss you!” She shakes her head sadly, like she can’t believe the state of the male population. “Don’t you think

that means he's gay, Natalia?"

"Nah," I say, "He was probably just being nice." Although it is a little weird.

"Which one is he?"

"Over there," Adrianna says. "The one with the blonde hair." She points to a table over near the windows, and I let my eyes wander around the caf, pretending I'm looking for Luke. But what I'm really doing is looking for Cam. And then I spot him.

He's joined Raine's table, along with a couple of other guys. Raine's being all flirty, pulling on Cam's tie while he pretends to try and get her to stop. I think about how he was with me in study hall, how he saw me reading Day by Day Armageddon and made a big deal about it. At the time I thought maybe he was flirting with me, but now that I see him being all touchy-feely with Raine, I realize I was wrong.

I quickly avert my eyes before he can catch me looking.

But Chelsey and Adrianna definitely notice.

"I don't even like him," I say defensively.

They exchange a "yeah right" look.

"I don't! I was only asking about him because he asked me to hang out this weekend." I don't tell them how he sat next to me in class. I don't tell him how he loved the exact same book that I was reading. I don't tell them how he smelled super delicious and how when his eyes looked into mine I couldn't help but feeling like I wanted to kiss him.

Chelsey drops her fork into her blue cheese dressing. "Shut up."

"Wait," Adrianna says, "Campbell Elliott? Asked you on a date?"

“Not a date,” I say, “He, um, asked me to come over to some girl named Becca’s house? With him and Raine? Or actually, maybe it’s Raine’s house. I’m still a little fuzzy on the details.”

“Oh,” Chelsey says. She picks her fork back up and looks disappointed. “He was probably just being nice.”

“Cam is super nice,” Adrianna agrees. She thinks about it. “I’m not sure why, since he’s so hot.”

“Yeah,” Chelsey says, “But now that he’s even hotter he’ll probably be a total asshole by the end of the year.”

“Anyway,” Adrianna says, “I wouldn’t hang out with them if I were you, Natalia.

What’s the point of being friends with Cam if you can’t hook up with him?”

“Not to mention that if Raine thinks you like him, she’ll do her best to make your life a living hell,” Chelsey adds.

The bell rings then, and we gather up our trays and throw out our trash. But my lunchtime conversation echoes through my head for the rest of the day. And after the final bell rings, I realize that Chelsey and Adrianna are right. And that’s because inside my locker, on top of my math book, someone’s left me a note.

“STAY AWAY” it says in computer print-out lettering. And since I haven’t talked to anyone else pretty much all day, and I can’t imagine that Chelsey wants me to stay away from Adrianna or vice versa, it has to be from Raine. Warning me to stay away from Cam.

“See you later, Brit.”

Cam pulls my hair as he walks past me down the hall and up the stairs.

No, you won't, I think. I sigh and slam my locker door shut, ready for this day to finally be over.



# Chapter Six

## Campbell

Ever since I told the new girl I'd give her a ride to the party, I've been out of sorts. After all, it's one thing to maybe see her at Raine's house and strike up a convo, but it's totally different to actually drive her over. I don't want anybody getting the wrong idea. Including her. And then to top it all off I had to go and pull her hair on the way out of school. Why the fuck did I do that?

"Shit, she's coming over!" Aiden whispers to me as we're about to get in my car at the end of the day. I give Aiden rides because a) he's been my best friend since we were like two years old and b) he lives three houses over from me.

When he says 'she's coming over', the first thing that goes through my head is Natalia. But then I turn and see that it's Raine.

For a split second, I'm almost annoyed that it's Raine instead of Natalia, which is totally ridiculous. And maybe it shows on my face, even though I try to cover it up by pretending to be really happy to see her.

Raine gives me a look, a look almost like she can read my thoughts or something.

"Hey, Cam."

"Hey, Raine."

"Something wrong?" She smiles and cocks her head.

"Not at all. Why would anything be wrong?" I lean against my car, flexing my bicep. Girls keep telling me I have great arms so I might as well show them off.

"Wrong?" Aiden says. "Hell no. Cam over here is just so stoked about tomorrow he

can't stop blabbering about it. All day long it's Raine this and Raine that. I can't shut him up."

Raine doesn't even glance over at Aiden. It's like he never spoke. She keeps her eyes locked on mine. "You are coming over tomorrow, though. Aren't you?"

"Yeah. I mean, that's the plan and all."

She smiles more naturally this time and gives me a playful push on the shoulder.

"Good, because I have a BIG surprise for you. I promise you won't be disappointed."

"Can't wait."

Aiden has started ogling her ass like there's some kind of national breaking news story scrolling across it. The kid has no class whatsoever.

"You should come early, before everyone else gets there," she says.

"Right. No problem."

"Great." She licks her cherry red lips and turns to go. And then it hits me. If I just show up with the new girl at my side, it's going to look totally weird. But I can't ditch Natalia—after all, I told her I'd pick her up. So it's probably best that I say something now and make it casual.

"Oh, hey, I almost forgot," I say as Raine's leaving.

"Yeah?" She turns back around, walks backwards for a moment. She's wearing one of those tiny sweaters that doesn't quite cover her perfectly flat and tan stomach.

"Just wanted to make sure it's cool if Natalia comes early too, since I'm giving her a



ride. She's new in town so I thought...you know...just making her feel welcome."

Raine stops dead in her tracks. For a moment I'm sure she's going to tell me to go fuck myself. But instead she just smiles and waves off my concern. "Oh. Yeah, the new girl. Of course you can bring her. Don't be silly. Everyone's welcome!"

"Including me?" Aiden calls after her.

"Not really!" she calls back at him and then walks off.

"What the fuck was that?" Aiden says as we get in the car.

"Hey, don't be a hater. It's not your scene."

"I'm not talking about Raine telling me I can't go," Aiden says, buckling his seat belt as I turn the ignition.

"Oh."

"I'm talking about you bringing that new chick, Natalie—"

"Natalia."

"Well, what are you doing man?"

I pull out of the parking spot and head onto the street. "I'm not doing anything, I'm just giving the girl a ride. She's new to school, doesn't know anyone—"

"And suddenly you're mister hospitality?"

I give him a look. "What do you care?"

"You're going to blow it with the hottest, most amazing girl in this town—maybe in

the whole world.”

“Exaggerate much?”

“They haven’t done a scientific study on it yet, but Raine Marsden might just be the hottest girl in the entire free world. And you’re going to piss her off by bringing some random chick to her party.”

“Maybe the reason I can pull a chick like Raine is because I don’t really give a shit what she thinks.”

We stop at a red light.

Aiden smirks. “Sure you don’t. Keep telling yourself that, Cam.”

“And you keep telling yourself that I’m bringing you to the party.”

“Why can’t I go? You’ll bring that weird new chick and not your best friend in the whole world?”

I don’t answer.

He shakes his head. “This new girl. What’s so special about her?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s special about her. It’s not a big deal and you need to lay off me already. Raine doesn’t even care so why should you?”

We don’t say much for the rest of the ride home. I let him off at his house and he gets out of the car, nodding his head at me, grabbing his backpack and slamming the door as he goes. Aiden doesn’t usually get pissed off at me like this, but I can’t feel bad about it. Just because he lives his life through me doesn’t mean I have to make my decisions based on what will make him happiest.

When I get to my house, I see Brody's Range Rover in my driveway. What the hell? I get out and notice that his car engine is still ticking softly. So he only just arrived.

When I walk inside, I can hear him and my mom gabbing away like old friends.

It feels like an invasion.

Mom's laughing at something. "Oh, Brody, you're such a character."

"You know me, Mrs. Elliot. I'm just crazy like that." I see Brody hanging out over by the counter where mom is fixing a sandwich.

"Do you want mayonnaise, Brody?"

"Please. And lots of it." He sees me and grins.

Mom looks up. "Hi, honey! Look who stopped by?"

"Oh. What a surprise."

"What, not happy to see me?"

"Course I am." I drop my bag on the floor and walk into the kitchen. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Nothing. Just missed you guys. Especially your mom's awesome turkey club sandwiches." He brings his fingers to his mouth and makes a kissing sound.

"MMM...sooo good!"

"Right. You came by for a sandwich."

Mom goes back to making it. “You want one too, hon?”

“No thanks,” I say.

“Did Cam mention that he’s got a big important date tomorrow night, Mrs. Elliot?”

Mom gasps. “Why, no he did not! Cam? You have a date?”

“Only with the most beautiful, most popular girl in school—Raine Marsden.”

I feel my face redden as mom gasps again. She puts a hand to her chest. “Raine is gorgeous. And so sweet. In fact, I just ran into her the other day on my way to work, when I was getting gas. She actually went inside and got me a coffee while I pumped.

What a little gem she is.” She brings the sandwich to Brody like a servant feeding a king.

He smiles at me as he takes it and chomps an enormous bite. Chews for a long time.

I want to punch his stupid face.

Finally he swallows. “A-ma-zing.”

“Glad you like it, darling,” mom says. “Well, I’ll leave you two alone.” And then she leaves the room.

“You know, there’s this new invention called the cell phone,” I say, sitting down at the kitchen table. “You might want to try it sometime.”

Brody's phony smile evaporates. His face hardens. "Word is you're trying to bring that little skank Natalia to Raine's soiree."

"So?"

"So, you better get your head on straight. She's not wanted."

"Says who?"

"Says me. And that's enough."

I stare at him. I can't believe he came to my house, ate my mom's food and then thinks he can tell me what to do or who to see. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"I made you."

"You what?"

Brody stands up, and I suddenly realize that he wants to hurt me as bad—no worse—than I want to hurt him.

"I took your scrawny ass from zero to hero—dragged you to the weight room every goddamn morning. Fed you like a baby. And now look at you. Girls want you, you're on the football team, everything you have is because of me."

"Keep telling yourself that, bro. If that's what keeps you going, man, you just keep telling yourself that." My hands are clenched but I haven't moved. Yet.

"You're not bringing that chick to the party."

"Dude, you're crazy. Maybe the rumors are true after all."

“Rumors?”

“I mean, this whole scene just screams ‘roid rage.”

“So now you got jokes, huh? Mister comedian.” He bends down and places his hands on my chair, pinning me in. “Just remember what I said, Cam. You’ll come alone.

Or you’ll regret it.” Then he backs up and throws on his varsity jacket. “Tell your mom thanks for the awesome sandwich.”

And then he’s gone.



# Chapter Seven

## Natalia

When I get home from school (an hour and a half later than normal because I accidentally got on the wrong bus, which was completely embarrassing, since most seniors don't even ride the bus, and also because the bus driver made this big scene about it and then the right bus had to come and pick me up), I throw out the stupid note I found in my locker. Out of sight, out of mind.

Then I make myself a cup of tea, sit down at the kitchen table, pull out my books, and get ready to start on my homework. I have a lot of catching up to do. Santa Anna seems crazy hard.

My cell phone rings on the table next to me as I'm paging through my chemistry reading, and I jump. I had to get a new cell phone after everything that went down at my old school, and even though I know all that's behind me, and I've done my absolute best to keep my new number a secret, I still get nervous every time it rings.

But it's just my mom.

"Hi," I say, cradling the phone on my shoulder and adding some more sugar to my tea.

"Hi, honey," she says, "How was your first day of school?"

"Interesting," I say, "A lot different than public school." I decide not to mention the note that was in my locker. My mom and I are close, but still. Telling my mom about how the hottest guy in school talked to me and then some girls left a threatening note in my locker would not be a good idea. My mom's the type that would want to call the school and make a big fuss.



"I can't wait to hear about it," she says, "Maybe tomorrow? I'm getting out early. We could have dinner at that Thai place you love." My mom's a lawyer at a firm in the city, which means her commute is an hour each way, and since she works ten hour days to begin with, she's not home a lot. But like I said, we've always had a good relationship, probably because my dad left when I was little, so she's all I have.

Having dinner with her tomorrow sounds perfect. But still, I hesitate.

Tomorrow's the day I'm supposed to hang out at Raine's house with Cam and his friends.

But after seeing that note... I don't know what to do. "Sure," I say finally, figuring I can make up some excuse to tell Cam tomorrow. "That sounds great."

The doorbell rings then. Cam, I think for some reason, which makes no sense because obviously he doesn't know where I live and even if he did he wouldn't just be showing up at my house.

"Hold on," I say to my mom, and then heave myself up from the table. A quick glance through the curtains shows me it's not Cam. It is one of the kids from Santa Anna, though, a guy who was sitting at Raine and Cam's lunch table. He's in my math class. Brody, I think?

He sees me peering through the window and gives me a friendly wave. Great.

Any thought of possibly ignoring him evaporates as soon as he sees me.

"Uh, mom," I say, "I have to go."

"Why?" she says, "Who is it?" I can tell she's trying not to sound too alarmed.

"It's a friend from my new school." It's only half a lie. Brody's not a friend, but he is

from my new school.

“Okay,” she says, sounding relieved. “I’ll see you when I get home.”

I check my reflection in the front hallway mirror, smooth my hair, and then open the door.

“Hey,” Brody says.

“Hi.” I lean against the doorframe, seizing him up.

“I’m Brody. I’m in your math class.”

“I know.”

“I just thought I’d come over and say hi, you know, welcome you to Santa Anna.

We didn’t really get a chance to talk today.” His hands are shoved into the pockets of his jeans. He’s wearing a black leather jacket, and he has the same kind of confidence that Cam has. But while Cam’s cockiness seems almost new, Brody’s seems completely natural, like something that’s always been ingrained in his personality.

“So you’re like the Santa Anna Welcome Wagon?” I ask.

I meant it to be more rude than funny, but he grins. “I guess so, yeah. At least for the pretty girls.”

I roll my eyes. “What?” he says, “That line doesn’t work?”

“Not with me.”

“I thought all girls liked to be told they were pretty.”

“Only if the guy really means it.”

“I meant it.” I raise my eyebrows at him incredulously, but it doesn’t seem to deter him. In fact, he just gets bolder and says, “Can I come in?”

“I’m not letting you in my house,” I say, “I don’t even know you.”

He nods, like this makes sense. “Well, then can you come out?”

I’m about to tell him no way, but then I remember something. Brody has something I want. And that’s information. So I slide my shoes on and step out onto the front porch. I sit down on the step, and Brody sits down next to me, a little closer than I’d like, his leg touching mine.

“So how was your first day?” he asks.

“Well, besides the fact that someone left a note in my locker telling me to stay away from Cam, it was fine.”

“Someone left a note in your locker?” He seems shocked, like that kind of stuff doesn’t happen every day in the big bad world of adolescence.

“Come on,” I say, “Don’t tell me you’re shocked.” I lean over and grab my knees, pulling them up to my chest. A butterfly goes drifting by, it’s soft orange wings fluttering in the air. It’s October, and a little cold for a butterfly, but she must be one of the last holdouts of the cold weather. It perches on the bush next to me and stays there, it’s wings folding in, almost like it’s listening.

“No, I’m not shocked,” Brody says, “Just surprised.” He picks a small stone up from the landscaped bed around our walk and starts throwing it up in the air and catching it.

“Why?”

“Because it’s only your first day. Usually we wait at least a week to try and scare people off.”

I smile. “It’s fine,” I say, “I didn’t come here to make friends.”

“Then why did you come here?” he asks.

I realize too late that I’ve said too much, and so I quickly try and backtrack. “To get a better education,” I say.

He nods, and doesn’t push. “So about tomorrow…”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” he says, “Raine’s house?”

“How did you know about that?”

“People talk,” he says, smiling at me again. He has a nice smile.

“Great.” I put my head in my hands. I know that girls get crazy about boys. But don’t Raine and her friends realize that I’m not a threat? Raine is gorgeous. I’m a little above average on a good day, and that’s with the help of makeup and a straightening iron.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Brody says, reaching out and squeezing my shoulder.

“They’re not bad. They just take a little while to warm up to people.”

“Yeah, right. That’s code for, ‘in a few weeks, they’ll just snub you and not look at you like they want to gouge your eyeballs out.’”

He laughs. “No, seriously,” he says, “It’ll be fine. Come tomorrow. You’re going with Cam, right?”

“I was going with Cam,” I correct. “Now I don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“Afraid?”

“Not afraid,” I said. “Just cautious.”

“You know what they say about caution,” he says.

“That it can save you from a year of misery?”

“That it makes you miss out on things that are fun.”

“That’s the dumbest saying I ever heard.”

“That’s because I just made it up, and I couldn’t think of anything wittier.” I laugh.

“No, but seriously,” he says, “You should come. It’ll be fun. I’ll pick you up.

We can go together, let them see that you’re not interested in Cam.”

At the mention of his name, I blush. Brody must pick up on it, because he says,

“You aren’t, right? Interested in Cam?”

“No,” I say, “Of course not. I hardly know him.” But somehow, for some reason, just the mention of his name is causing my heart to shoot fireworks. The butterfly on the bush flies up into the air, and hovers there, before settling up again on a higher branch.

“Good.” Brody nods like it’s all settled, in the way that only someone who’s

completely self-assured and used to getting their way can. “So I’ll pick you up at three?”

I think about it. I guess it wouldn’t hurt. I mean, I don’t want to start the year off on the wrong foot, with Raine and her friends determined to make me miserable. And Brody might be right – showing up with him might make them think I’m not interested in Cam. And I’ll get to see him – Cam. The thought makes my heart race.

“All right,” I say finally.

“Good.” He stands up and brushes off the back of his jeans. “Should I get your cell number? Just in case?”

We trade cell phones and program each other’s numbers in. “Why are you being so nice to me?” I ask as he hands me my phone back.

“Because,” he says simply, “I like you.”

It’s only when I’m watching his truck pull out of the driveway that I realize I forgot to ask him how he knew where I lived.



# Chapter Eight

## Campbell

All morning I've been looking for Natalia, so that I can tell her that I need to pick her up early for Raine's this afternoon. Fuck Brody and his threats— if he wants to test me over this, he can bring it. I've gone up against Brody on the football field and he isn't as fast as me, even if he might be a little bigger and stronger. I'm not afraid of him and he's not going to bully me into changing my plans.

That's why I'm stunned when, on the way to math class, I see Natalia and Brody over by the first floor vending machines, talking together like old friends. So stunned that instead of walking up to them and saying something witty, or at the very least continuing on my way, I just stop and stand there like an idiot. Staring.

And then Brody sees me. His face breaks into a wide, assholish grin. "Hey, it's Cam!" he says, loud enough for the entire hall to hear him.

Natalia spins and looks at me, then moves her gaze to the floor as her whole complexion reddens.

"What's going on?" I ask, clearing my throat as I approach.

"Decided on a pre-calc snack?" Brody says. "Nice." He offers up his fist for a pound but I just nod instead. He laughs.

"Yeah, I was in the mood for something sweet," I lie.

"Sorry, they're all out of Natalias," Brody says, looking her up and down.

She glances at him when he says it but I can't read the expression on her face.

"Is that so?" I reply.



“Yeah, I got the last one. Very rare around these parts.”

Natalia finally meets my gaze and half-smiles as if apologizing for Brody’s antics.

“Hi, Cam.”

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to talk to you. About tonight.” Let Brody hear me tell her I’m picking her up early. Screw him.

“Yeah, about that—” she starts.

Brody turns to her. “What did we decide, three o’clock, Natalia?”

She hesitates.

I’m even more confused now, if that’s even possible. “Three o’clock?” I repeat, like a retarded parrot.

“Yeah, that’s when I’m picking her up for the party.” Brody grins again. He starts unwrapping a pack of gum.

“That’s funny, I thought we’d said I would give you a ride.”

But she refuses to look at me now. “I’m...I’m sorry...I just...”

“Hey, whatever. No biggie. As long as you have a ride and all, that’s what’s important.”

“Yeah, she’s fine, buddy. You really shouldn’t worry so much.” Brody holds out the pack of gum to me and I take a piece.

“Thanks,” I say. Then I turn and leave without looking back.

The rest of the day I can barely focus. Just a few hours ago the guy called her a skank and now he's taking her to Raine's party? Doesn't she realize he's using her simply to prove a point to me?

Brody's just threatened because he needs to be top dog all the time. It's not about him liking Natalia, it's about him showing me up.

Well that's fine, I decide. Natalia wasn't who I thought she was. In fact, she showed me her true colors—she blew me off without a second thought. It annoys me way more than it should.

At least Raine has always been consistent, I think.

So when I bump into her and Becca and Teri—the triad—in the hallway, I make sure to be extra friendly.

“Hey Raine,” I say, as they're passing.

Raine spins, gives me a look that tells me she isn't altogether happy with me at the moment. “I'm running late, Cam.”

“It'll only take a sec.”

She gives her friends some kind of unspoken signal and they keep walking. Raine approaches me as I pull out my phone. “Just wanted to get your address and cell number for this afternoon.”

She sighs. “When should we expect you and—whatever her name is?”

“Oh, her?” I yawn. “Yeah, that's not really happening.”

Raine's eyes positively light up when I say it. “Oh, that's too bad. Is everything all

right?”

I look at her. “Yeah. Everything’s more than all right. As long as I get to see you tonight, anyway.”

She slaps my chest. “Don’t be cute.”

I grab her hand. “I’m not. I’m serious.” For the first time since the new girl arrived, I’m actually feeling interested in Raine. She’s hot. Hot as hell, and she’s not playing games with me.

“If you’re serious, then you’ll be ready for tonight.”

“Ready for what?”

“Anything and everything.”

“Always.”

She pulls her hand away from mine, but not too hurriedly. Our fingers are entangled for a long moment. She tells me her address and phone number and I put it into my phone, and then she walks away, looking back over her shoulder once as she goes.

For a second I’m confused all over again about Natalia. I still can’t figure out why she would want to suddenly ditch me for Brody. Is he really such an amazing catch?

I don’t get it.

Whatever, I tell myself, she’s not worth it. You don’t even really know her.

And she’ll realize that I did a lot better for myself when she sees me with Raine

tonight, while Natalia's forced to sit around and stroke Brody's fat ego the entire time. I smile a little. I'm going to make sure Natalia knows that I'm not even remotely bummed out about not going with her, and if she thinks I'm spending my time crying over her and Brody, she's got another thing coming.



# Chapter Nine

## Natalia

“This is kind of awkward,” I say as I buckle myself into Brody’s truck that afternoon.

“Why?”

“Um,” I say. “Going to Raine’s? She hates me.”

“Who could hate you?” Brody says. He pulls the car out of the parking lot and turns onto the main street behind the school.

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I.” He looks over at me and grins. “No, but seriously,” he says, “You worry too much. Just relax, it’ll be fine.”

I take a deep breath and lean my head back against the seat. Of course Raine isn’t the one I’m really worried about. Well, not totally. I’m worried about Cam, too.

I didn’t know what to say to him this morning when I ran into him near the vending machines. I mean, I wanted to apologize, but I didn’t want to seem like I thought it was a big deal that he was supposed to drive me.

But then he started acting like it was a big deal, and then I didn’t really know how to backtrack, so I had to just go along with it, and then Brody started saying all that stupid stuff about Natalias being sweet and blah blah blah. It was like a pissing contest, right there in front of me. With me as the prize! But I’m not stupid – it could have been any girl there, and they’d have been doing the same thing. Whatever’s going on between Brody and Cam is way deeper than me.

When we get to Raine’s house, Brody leads me out to the backyard, where Cam

and the two girls from their lunch table are hanging out on the deck near a hot tub. Great.

No one told me to bring a bathing suit.

“Hey,” Cam says, giving us a huge smile. Obviously he’s over the whole awkward encounter from this morning. Maybe I was reading into it too much. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Hey,” Brody says. “Becca, Teri.” He sits down on one of the benches at the patio table, and the two girls say hi to him and then ignore me. I sit down next to Brody, and Cam sits across from us. Becca and Teri are at the other end of the bench, smoking cigarettes, their heads huddled together, deep in conversation.

There are voices coming through the kitchen window from inside the house.

Raine and what sounds like her parents. You can’t really make out what they’re saying, but their tones sound heated.

“What’s going on in there?” Brody asks.

“Her parents,” Cam says easily. “She didn’t think they were going to be home until later, but they showed up and here we were, drinking.”

“Shit,” Brody says, shaking his head. “They flip?”

“Big time,” Cam says, “They’re fucking pissed. She’s trying to calm them down, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we all have to leave.”

But when Raine comes back a few minutes later, she doesn’t look like anyone has to leave. In fact, she’s all smiles. “It’s okay,” she tells us, rolling her eyes. “We just have to keep the drinking covert.” She looks at me, her eyes darkening. “Hi, Natalia.”

“Hey,” I say. I give her a half smile, which of course she doesn’t return.

The three girls peel their clothes off, revealing bikinis underneath, and then slide into the hot tub.

“You going in?” Brody asks me.

“I didn’t bring a suit.”

“That’s okay,” he says. I feel Cam stiffen across from me.

“I think I’ll just hang out here for a second,” I say.

“Come on,” Cam says, “At least put your feet in.”

I hesitate. But things feel okay between us after the weirdness that happened this morning, and I don’t want to screw that up. Plus I don’t want the girls to think I’m a total bitch. I don’t know why it even matters, but somehow it does. And Brody’s the only one who’s been even halfway nice to me, and I don’t want him to end up feeling like he has to baby-sit me.

So I roll up the bottom of my jeans and perch on the side of the hot tub. Brody does the same, and so does Cam.

“You guys,” Teri says, “Come in.” She leans over and picks up a bottle of beer she has stashed on the ground behind the tub and takes a sip, then hides it again.

“I will,” Brody says. “But first I’m just going to hang here for a second.”

“Me too,” Cam says, giving Brody the evil eye, which in turn earns him a dirty look from Raine. The three girls start talking about some TV show I’ve never heard of, and so I say to Cam, “Listen, I’m sorry. About the mix-up with the ride.”



“It’s okay,” he says, “Don’t worry about it.”

“Cam’s a big boy,” Brody says. “Aren’t you Cam?”

“No, I feel bad,” I say, “I should have let you know, but I didn’t have your number and – “

“It’s fine,” he says, “Seriously. But I appreciate you apologizing.” His eyes get kind of stormy, and before I can say anything else, he’s sliding into the hot tub. He grabs Raine around the waist and pulls her into the water, and she squeals in delight.

They wrestle around for a few minutes, and then she takes his hand and pulls him out of the tub and leads him into the house. Probably so they can go make out or something. I put my hand in the water and let the bubbles swirl around my fingers, telling myself it’s stupid to be upset about some guy I don’t even know.

“So,” Brody says, looking at me. “Why’d you transfer to Santa Anna?”

“Just... needed a change.” I feel the hot water on my toes, and I flex them a few times. Becca and the other girl are pushed up against the other side of the tub, ensconced in their own conversation.

“Just needed a change, huh? Yesterday you told me that it was because you wanted a better education.

“Well, I wanted a change of a better education.”

“Ahh,” he says. “Sounds like you have a scandal you’re not telling me about.”

His tone is teasing, but something in his eyes seems serious, and I swallow. Hard.

There's no way he could know about what happened at my old school, but it's still unnerving.

And then, all of a sudden, he leans over and kisses me. I'm so shocked, that for a split second I don't know what's happening, but then I instinctually start kissing him back. He's not a bad kisser. His lips are soft, and firm, and I try to relax and just go with it, but I can't.

"Sorry," I say, pulling away. "Sorry, I just – "

"No, I'm sorry," he says, "I shouldn't have – "

"No," I say, "You didn't do anything wrong." But my vision is getting kind of weird and blurry, and I stand up. The sound of the water from the hot tub rushing around is echoing in my ears, and I can't make it stop. "Where's the bathroom?" I say, trying to keep my voice as even as possible.

"Um, it's in there," Brody says, "Through the sunroom and second door on the left." He gets up to go with me, but I stop him.

"No," I say, "It's okay. I'm fine. I'll...I'll be right back."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." He sits back down, and I stumble out of the hot tub and into the house.

Cam and Raine aren't in the sunroom, but as I walk by, I catch a glimpse of them kissing on the couch in the living room, his hands in her hair, her body on top of his.

I rush by and into the bathroom, my heart pounding in my throat. I close the door and lock it, then turn the cold water on full blast. You're okay, I tell myself, this isn't like the other times. I splash water on my face, and take deep breaths like they told

me to do whenever I started having a panic attack.

I sit down on the closed toilet seat and take a few minutes to calm myself down, counting to five on the inhales and exhales and waiting for my heart to slow to a normal rate. When I start to feel better, I wash my face and then reapply my lip gloss.

On my way back out, Cam and Raine aren't in the living room anymore, but I can hear voices coming from the kitchen. The same voices I heard before. Raine and her parents. Arguing.

"Raine Lynn!" her mom's saying, "I cannot believe that after we specifically told you no alcohol, you did it anyway!"

"You're grounded, young lady," her dad adds. I'm almost at the sunroom now, tiptoeing so they can't hear me. I'm expecting to hear Raine starting to go postal any minute, but instead, her voice gets almost low.

"Listen," she says slowly, "This is not a big deal. I'm old enough to drink if I want to." She's being so calm that it's almost creepy.

I wait for her parents to start going crazy again, but all I hear is silence. I quickly push through the sunroom and back out onto the deck, but when I get there, everyone's gone.

"Brody?" I try.

No answer. Weird. I walk down the steps and onto the lawn, figuring maybe they all went through the gate and out to the front yard after Raine's parents freaked out.

There's a butterfly flying around the hedge, and it flutters in front of my eyes as I walk by. That's weird, I think, peering at it closely. The wings look like they're getting darker.

“Natalia?”

I turn around. Cam. “Hey,” I say, “Where did everyone go? I figured – “ And then I stop. Because he doesn’t look so good. He’s pale, and he’s walking kind of...

hunched over. “What’s wrong?” I ask. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “I feel a little weird.”

I start to take a step. But before I can get to him, he collapses on the lawn....

**TRICKED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book Two)**

By Lauren Barnholdt & Aaron Gorvine

Copyright 2011 Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental



# Chapter One

## Natalia

Cam's on the ground, and I have no idea what to do. I've never been that great in a crisis, but there's no one else around, and so I rush over to him. "Cam?" I ask, kneeling down next to him on the grass. "Cam? Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He sits up and shakes his head back and forth slowly. His skin is still slightly pale.

"Put your head down," I instruct, "Between your legs. I think you fainted." He does as I tell him, dropping his head down below his knees. "Now take deep breaths."

He does, and when he looks up a few moments later, the color's starting to return to his face.

"I don't know what that was," he says, "I just... started feeling weak."

He tries to stand up, but I put my hand on his arm, stopping him. "Don't," I say.

"You need to just sit here for a few more seconds, wait until you feel better."

"I feel fine," he says, but he stays sitting. The evening sun is shining through the bushes that line either side of Raine's backyard, and the rays glint off his hair, making it shine. I resist the urge to reach over and push a lock off his forehead. I already have my hand on his arm, and the heat that's radiating up my fingers from his skin is almost too much to take. "Where is everybody?" he asks.

"I don't know. I was in the bathroom, and then I came back out, and everyone was gone." I leave out the part about how Brody kissed me and the part about how I freaked out.

“They probably went to the front yard when Raine’s parents started going ballistic,” he says, “I think I’m going to try to stand up now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He stands up slowly, and his legs seem sturdier, but I stoop down a little and offer my shoulder, and he wordlessly drapes his arm around me. I still have my hand on him, and all the contact is making my heart race. Once he’s standing up, he looks at me, his blue eyes locking right onto mine. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, somehow knowing he doesn’t want me to make a big deal out of it. “Do you need some water or something?” I look over my shoulder back toward the house. I so don’t want to go in there, especially if Raine and her parents are still screaming at each other in the kitchen, but if Cam wants me to, I will.

“No,” he says, “I’m fine.”

“What the fuck?” Brody comes running into the backyard, his face flushed.

“Where the hell have you guys been?”

“Where have we been?” Cam asks. “Where the hell have you been? We came out and everybody was gone.”

“We went into the front yard,” Brody explains, “After Raine’s parents came out and caught Becca with the beer.” Cam’s hand is now on mine, and Brody’s eyes take it in, and he looks at me, questioning.

I’m about to tell him Cam fainted, when I feel a soft squeeze of pressure on my hand. Cam. Telling me not to say anything.

“Anyway,” I say, pulling my hand out of Cam’s and turning to Brody. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at my hand pointedly.  
“Are you ready to go?”

I turn to Cam, wanting to ask him if he’s okay to drive, wanting to insist that he should ride with us. But he’s giving me that same look, and so all I say is, “See you later?”

“Yeah,” Cam says, “Later.”

And then I follow Brody to his truck.

\*\*\*

I’m expecting the whole ride home to be pretty awkward, because hello, Brody kissed me and then I freaked out – what teenage guy really wants to talk about something like that? But Brody’s full of surprises, because as soon as we’re out of Raine’s driveway, he says, “So let’s talk about the kiss.”

“The kiss?”

“Yeah.” He glances at me and grins.

“Why do we have to talk about it?”

“Why not?”

“Usually kisses are better left unspoken about,” I tell him. The light on the dash beeps for me to put my seatbelt on, because I’m so frazzled that I forgot to put it on when I got in. I slide it over and buckle it. “It’s more romantic that way.”

“That makes sense,” Brody says, nodding. “Or at least it would, if it were a normal kiss.”



“Are you saying my kisses aren’t normal?”

“I’m saying that when I kissed you, you kind of freaked out.”

“I did not!”

“Natalia, you ran inside the house and didn’t come out for fifteen minutes.”

“It wasn’t fifteen minutes.”

He raises his eyebrows skeptically. “All right,” he says, “Fine. I can see you need some time to process this.”

“Don’t be a smartass,” I say.

“We can talk about it tomorrow. At breakfast.”

“Breakfast?”

“Yeah,” he says, “I’ll pick you up at ten.”

“Who says I want to go to breakfast with you?”

“Don’t you?”

I think about it. “Okay,” I say finally, “I’ll see you at ten. But you’re buying, and we can’t spend the whole time talking about the kiss.”

“Can we spend half the time talking about the kiss?”

“How about ten percent of the time?”

“What if I try to kiss you again?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

We’re in my driveway now, and I say goodbye and then jump out of his truck.

But as I’m walking up the driveway and into my house, my phone starts ringing, and so I pull it out of my bag as I shove my key into the lock and open the door. It’s a number I don’t recognize, and for a second, I think about not answering it.

“Hello?” I say, stepping into my foyer.

“Hey. It’s Cam.”

“Oh,” I say, dropping my bag onto the table near the door. “Hey. Uh, how’d you get my number?”

“Took it out of Brody’s phone.”

“You stole my number out of Brody’s phone?”

“Not stole. Borrowed.”

“Right. I forgot you’re a master borrower.” He has a sexy phone voice, and I think again about how it felt to have my hand on his arm a little while ago. That same rush of heat fills my body.

“Yeah. So um, listen...I just wanted to say thanks. For not making a big deal out of what happened.” His voice is lower now, quieter, and I wonder if he’s still at Raine’s house.

“No problem.” I walk into the kitchen, then open the refrigerator and pull out a bottle of water. My throat is dry, and I down half the bottle in a few gulps. “What did

happen, anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean have you ever fainted before?"

There's silence and then he says, "No."

"Oh."

"It was probably low blood sugar or something."

"Probably." I think about telling him he should get it checked out, or at least tell his parents or something, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to hear that.

"Anyway, um, I wanted to make sure that you don't...I mean, that you understand that I don't really want anyone knowing about it."

"About what?"

"About how I fainted."

"Oh, okay. But why not?"

"Because if my coach finds out, he might not let me play. And we have a really important game coming up."

"Well, you don't have to worry," I tell him, "Your secret's safe with me."

"Thanks, Natalia," he says, "And we should all hang out again sometime."

"All of us? Like me, you and Raine?" Is he crazy?

“No, I mean... I just meant that you should come around sometime. Like, to another party.” I put my water down on the counter. So that’s why he’s calling. To try and get me to keep his secret, which is fine. But now he’s pretending to be all nice and acting like we should all hang out so that I’ll be sure to keep my mouth shut.

“Sure,” I say. “Of course, I’m not sure Raine’s really going to be inviting me over again after she put that note in my locker.”

“What note?”

“Oh, she didn’t tell you? She put a note in my locker that said ‘Stay Away.’”

There’s a pause and then, “That doesn’t sound like something Raine would do.”

But I can tell he doesn’t really believe it. He knows it sounds exactly like something Raine would do. “Anyway, like I said, we should all hang out again sometime. You’d like her if you could get to know her.”

Suddenly, I’m pissed. He wanted me to keep the whole thing about him fainting a secret, and now he’s taking Raine’s side, telling me that I should give her another chance.

Then I remember how it was with him and Brody at the vending machine this morning, and so I fight back the only way I know how. “Sounds great,” I say, “Maybe this weekend? But I’ll have to ask Brody. We’re going to brunch tomorrow, but he didn’t say anything about tomorrow night, so we might be free.”

For a second, I think I’ve done what I set out to do, that I’ve hurt him, because there’s silence on the line. But then he says smoothly, “I love brunch. In fact, brunch sounds great. Me and Raine could join you two.”

“Perfect,” I lie, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of telling him they can’t

come.

“Great,” he says, “So I’ll call Brody, and get us invited.”

“Great!”

“Great!”

“Great!” I force my voice to sound cheery, but as soon as I hang up, my anger dissipates and all I can think about is that tomorrow morning me, Cam, Brody, and Raine, are all going to be hanging out. Together. In the same room. Just the four of us. I sit down at the kitchen table and bury my head in my hands.



# Chapter Two

## Campbell

When I get off the phone with Natalia, Raine's coming out of the living room where she was once again talking to her folks, and I wonder what's going on. There hasn't been any screaming and yelling for a while now, so I couldn't hear what they were discussing.

Becca and Teri took off a few minutes ago and so it's just us now.

But Raine sees me putting my cell away and her eyebrows raise.

"Who was that?" she smiles, keeping her tone light, like it's no big deal.

I shrug. It's already seeming like a really dumb idea to have invited me and Raine along to brunch tomorrow. But something about how Natalia was acting, throwing Brody in my face like that, like I even give a shit, really pissed me off.

"Brody and Natalia want us to come to breakfast with them in the morning."

Raine folds her arms and her eyes narrow. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Technically it's brunch, not breakfast." I flash what I hope is a winning smile.

"So that was Brody you were talking to?"

I sort of grunt and nod my head.

"I don't want to go."

"Come on," I say, "It might be kind of funny, watching those two try to hit it off?"

Pretty ridiculous couple if you ask me. We'll have enough gossip for days."

Raine walks closer, her high heels clacking on the hardwood floor of the sun porch. "Well, she's definitely not hot enough for him, that's for sure. But—I don't know." She cocks her head, thinks about it. "They might actually be okay together."

I smirk. "You think?"

"Why, are you jealous?"

"Of Brody? Hell no." I grab her by the wrist and pull her toward me. She falls onto my lap. "So you'll go with me?"

"Sure," she says, sighing. "I guess I'm going to have to get to know the new girl better if she's going to be dating your best friend."

"That's what I told—" I catch myself at the last second. "...Him. I was telling Brody it would be cool for us to all hang out."

Shit, I'm really getting myself into a hole on this one.

But If Raine knew that I was actually talking with Natalia just now...it wouldn't be pretty. Especially after she left that note in Natalia's locker, which, let's face it, sounds exactly like the kind of fucked up ridiculous shit she'd do.

Raine holds onto me and rests her cheek against my shoulder, then whispers in my ear. "You look so hot tonight."

A wave of dizziness crashes over me and I feel for a moment like I might faint again. "Whoa."

She leans back and looks at me. "You okay?"



“Yeah. Just...my rib. I got a nasty hit in football practice yesterday. Still hurts.”

The spell is passing but my heart's still beating fast. And I'm sweating.

For a moment it occurs to me that I felt better when Natalia was around. Even when we were on the phone arguing a minute ago. I wasn't all spazzy and nervous like I am right now.

Whatever, I think. It's totally a coincidence. I must be dehydrated or something.

I'll pick up some Gatorade on my way home and I'll be fine.

“Maybe I should get you an icepack or something?” Raine asks.

“No. I'm okay. Really.”

“Good. Want a beer?”

“I don't think that's such a good idea.”

She cocks her head. “Why not?”

“Because. We're in your house and your parents were really pissed off about the drinking.”

She laughs and claps her hands together. “Oh Cam. You're the most funny boy I know. Like for real. My parents don't even care.”

I laugh. “Don't be ridiculous, they were just freaking the fuck out. Your dad was so pissed I thought he was going to give himself a heart attack.”

She puts a hand on one hip and now an eyebrow arcs, as if to say, ‘I'm totally for real and hotter than ever’. It's a sexy look. I wonder if she's practiced it before.

“You don’t believe me?” she says. “Watch.”

She turns and yells towards the living room. “Mom, dad! Come here, right now.”

Her voice is strong and commanding.

I sit up straighter and Raine gets up and perches on the arm of the couch next to me. “Hey, hey, Raine—what the hell are you doing?” The last thing I need is her parents coming in here and everyone starting to fight again. I’m not really up for a round three.

She looks at me with a sly grin. “Proving it to you. I mean what I say, Cam.”

This chick is wild. I mean, not forty minutes ago her parents were giving her the rundown like I couldn’t believe. They were roasting her, telling her she was going to be grounded, going to lose her car for a week, all kinds of stuff. They weren’t playing around.

And now she’s calling them in to...do what exactly? Maybe it’s a big joke and she’s just going to ask them if I can have a Diet Coke or something.

Her mom and dad come into the room looking haggard, like they’ve both been awake for a few days. Her dad’s eyes are dark and baggy, her mom’s face pale.

“What is it honey?” Her mother says. Neither of them so much as look at me.

“Cam wants a beer. Is it all right—“

“No I don’t,” I say, holding my hands up. “I’m fine, Mister and Mrs. Marsden.”

“No, he’s not fine, he wants a few beers. Can he have the last of your Sam Adams, dad?”

“Oh. Sure. Let me go get them. Is three all right, Cam?”

“What?”

“Three. Or four. I think I have a Pale Ale left as well.”

“Sir, honestly—“

“Yes, daddy, please bring all four.”

I stare at her. “Raine, come on.”

“Relax, I told you they’re cool. Right mom?”

Her mom nods tiredly. “Yes, darling. But we are exhausted. It’s been a long night.”  
Her mother just stands there with her arms dangling limply at her sides.

A moment later, Mr. Marsden appears, and he’s carrying four bottles, two in each hand. He places them on the ornate glass and iron table in the center of the porch.

“Good?”

“Very good. Okay you two, run along to bed!” Raine says, waving her fingers and dismissing them.

“Thanks honey,” her mom says, and then she and Raine’s dad leave the room.

I stare at the empty doorway. “What. The. Fuck.”

Raine is still sitting on the arm of the couch. She smiles down at me. “Told you.”

“I saw them yelling at you, threatening you...just like half an hour ago.”

“Cam, you don’t know my parents. They’re so into playing up how serious and strict they are when everyone’s around. But once it’s just me and them, they’re totally different.”

“But it wasn’t just you and them.”

She giggles. “Maybe you charmed them with your sexy smile and your Justin Bieber hair.”

I grin, “I do not have Justin Bieber hair. This is a very expensive, perfect fade, thank you very much.” I pull my hat off and run my hand over my head, and she laughs.

“So do you want to stay over?” she asks. “You could spend the night and everything.”

“I don’t think so.” A wind blows through the open screen door and I shiver. “I should probably head out.”

“Are you sure?” She runs her hand down my chest.

“Yeah,” I say, “I told my folks I’d be home at a reasonable hour and I can’t do... whatever the hell you did to get your folks to chill.”

“You just have to be persistent.” She smiles, leans in and kisses me. Her lips are soft and warm. Her tongue goes into my mouth.

I’m kissing her back.

And for some weird reason...thinking of Natalia.



# Chapter Three

## Natalia

Brunch seems kind of like something only rich kids would do. I mean, we never went to brunch at my old school. In fact, no one even made plans before noon. And now here it is, ten o'clock on Saturday morning, and I'm standing outside on my porch, waiting for Brody to pick me up.

I'm wearing a pair of skinny jeans, a black cowl neck sweater (bought last night in an emergency I-need-something-to-wear-to-brunch trip to the mall), and flat black boots. I showered this morning, but didn't wash my hair, so it looks kind of tousled. I didn't want to seem like I was trying too hard.

I almost, almost thought about showing up in a pair of my PINK sweatpants and a hoodie, but then I looked up the restaurant we're going to online – Cowboy Charlie's—

and realized that definitely wasn't going to fly. Cowboy Charlie's is a bar, but it's slightly upscale, with cloth tablecloths and all kinds of exotic-sounding things on the menu, like toasted goat cheese omelettes and blueberry agave smoothies. Welcome to Santa Anna, I think, as Brody pulls into my driveway, right on time.

"You look great," he says as I hop into his truck.

"Thanks," I say, "So do you." He's wearing a pair of jeans and a dark green sweater, and his hair is still wet from the shower.

"So Raine and Cam are going to meet us there," he says, as he pulls out of my driveway. "I hope that's okay."

"Fine with me," I say, wondering if I should mention the fact that Cam called me yesterday and that's how these plans even got made. But then Brody will probably

want to know why Cam called me, and then I'll have to make something up, so I decide to just go ahead and let him think it was his idea. I'm guessing Cam must have called Brody last night and mentioned brunch, pretending that he and I never talked about it beforehand.

I'm afraid Brody's going to bring up our kiss again, and how I freaked out, but instead, we chat about sports and music until we pull up in front of the bar a few minutes later. Brody circles the block a couple of times until easing his truck into an empty spot.

When we get inside the restaurant, the hostess shows us to a table in the back, the smell of French toast and bacon following us as we take our seats. Cam and Raine aren't there yet, and so we order smoothies (vanilla blueberry for me, strawberry banana for Brody), and an order of potato pancakes to share while we wait. The bar is warm and cozy, with dartboards lining one wall, and a digital jukebox in the corner. There are a few other people around, but it's actually not that busy for a Saturday morning.

Five minutes later, Cam and Raine come breezing in.

"I'm sooo sorry," Raine says, "Cam was late and then we couldn't find a parking spot." She leans in and kisses Brody on both cheeks, then leans down and does the same to me. She smells like cherries and some kind of flowery perfume. "Cam was late, yes,"

Cam says, "But then Raine made me wait in her driveway for fifteen minutes while she finished getting ready." He scowls and sits down in a chair across from me. He doesn't acknowledge me or Brody.

"Wow," I say, in an effort to lighten the mood, "Someone's not a morning person."

"Nope," he says. Then he reaches over and takes a sip of my smoothie, bypassing my straw and drinking right out of the glass. Something about the gesture is

intimate, like we're so close that we can just go around sharing each other's drinks, and I feel my face get hot as it puts it down next to me. As if he can sense it, Brody reaches over and grabs my hand.

"What is everyone having?" Raine asks as she looks at the menu. If she's bothered by the fact that Cam was sharing my drink, she doesn't show it.

"I think I'm going to try the goat cheese omelette," I tell her, figuring that if she's making an effort to be nice, I should, too.

"The omelettes here are amazing," she says. But when the waitress comes over to drop off our potato pancakes and take our order, Raine gets a stack of pancakes with extra chocolate chips and a side of bacon.

"I'm starving," she says, forking up a piece of potato pancake and popping it into her mouth.

"What's up, Cam, my boy?" Brody asks, grinning at him across the table. "You hanging in there?"

"I'm fine," Cam says. "Just tired."

I look at him, questioning, wondering if he's okay, if him being tired has anything to do with how he collapsed yesterday.

"I know what'll wake you up," Brody says. He nods toward the dart board.

"Loser buys breakfast."

"You're on." The boys get up and head to the darts, leaving me alone with Raine.

I take a nervous sip of my smoothie.



She leans in close to me. "I'm glad they left," she says.

"You are?"

"Yeah." She leans in even closer. "Is your sweater new?" she asks.

I think about lying, but then I say, "Yeah."

She smiles and then reaches down and pulls off the sticker that's stuck to the side of me, the sticker with the big M on it for medium. She sticks it onto the table.

"Ohmigod!" I say, "How embarrassing." I feel my face flush hot.

"It's fine," she says, waving her hand like it's no big deal and helping herself to more potato pancake. "No one saw. The only reason I even noticed is because I'm sitting right next to you."

"Thanks," I say, wondering if Cam told her she should be nicer to me. And if so, what else did he tell her? That I'm no threat? That he only invited me to her house yesterday to be polite?

"So what's the deal with you and Brody?" she asks, watching as the boys set up their dart game. Brody walks behind the white line that's painted on the floor of the bar, takes aim, and throws his dart into the board. The muscles of his shoulder flex under his sweater.

"Um, I'm not sure," I say.

"He's hot." She looks at me. "I'm, like, in love with Cam, but I can still say that Brody's hot, can't I? I mean, it's not really a matter of opinion."

"True," I say, "He is hot." I think about him kissing me yesterday, how his lips felt on mine. I twist my napkin nervously in my lap.

As if she's reading my mind, Raine says, "Did you kiss him?"

"I don't kiss and tell," I say, taking a sip of my orange juice and trying to seem like I'm being coy. She might be acting nice, but we're so not ready to start swapping kiss stories and acting like we're BFFs 4eva.

Raine leans into me then, her deep blue eyes staring right into mine. Then she says, very slowly and carefully, "It's okay, Natalia. You can tell me. Did you and Brody kiss? How do you feel about him?" Her voice is soft and slow, and it's actually kind of creeping me out.

"I don't know," I say shrugging and looking away. "I mean, I just met him."

A look of shock and almost... terror passes her face. But that can't be right. Why would she be scared of me? Is she nervous that I like Cam still? I'm about to say something else, but before I can, loud voices come from where the boys are playing darts.

"You pulled it out and it wasn't even in the bullseye," Cam's saying.

"Man, you are tapped," Brody says, shaking his head and handing Cam the darts.

"It was in."

"Then why the fuck did you pull it out so fast?"

Brody takes a step closer to him. "I didn't know I needed someone to check on my darts."

"Well, you don't, unless you're cheating."

"What the fuck is your problem? I wasn't cheating." Brody takes another step

closer to Cam, and their voices are getting louder A few people at the tables around us turn to look, and Raine pushes her chair back, like she's about to go over there. But before she can, Cam pushes Brody.

"Get out of my face, man."

"I wasn't in your face," Brody says, "And don't put your hands on me."

Cam pushes Brody again. And then Brody pushes Cam. And before I know what's happening, the two of them are wrestling. A guy at one of the nearby tables stands up and pulls them apart, and Raine and I rush over.

"What the fuck, man?" Cam asks, straightening his shirt as he and Brody get separated. I'm over by Brody, my hands on his chest, trying to calm him down. I can feel his heart beating hard through his shirt.

"Calm down," Raine says to Cam. She's talking in that same voice she was just using on me a few minutes ago. And then, suddenly, she turns to the guy who broke it up.

"Thanks," she says.

"No problem," he says. "But you guys might want to think about paying your bill and getting out of here before they decide to kick you out."

A finger of icy dread runs up and down my spine. That voice. I would know it anywhere. I force myself to turn around.

"Hello, Natalia," he says.



# Chapter Three

## Campbell

This friendly brunch has basically turned into a WWE match. Everyone in the place is staring at us. Some random guy is talking to Natalia. Apparently they know each other -- he's acting really nonchalant but she doesn't seem very happy to have run into him.

"We should be going," she says, pulling at Brody's arm. "Let's just pay. Come on."

"Fine," Brody says, glaring at me. I glare right back.

"No hello, how are you, what's new?" the guy who broke us up says to Natalia, touching her wrist briefly. She pulls away a step. He's tall, but on the thin side. Wiry, though, and you get the vibe that he's not physically weak. He broke Brody and I apart no problem. He's wearing a popped collar shirt and a pair of jeans, totally prepped out, but there's Tattoo of a Jack of clubs just visible on the lower part of his neck, near his collarbone.

"How are you, Derek?" Natalia says, after a long pause.

"I'm fine, Natalia. Just having a nice breakfast until World War III broke out at the table next to me. Who are your friends? They seem like really nice people." His tone is sarcastic.

I've already calmed down and Brody seems to be cooling off as well. He gives me a little smirk and then turns his attention to this Derek kid. "Brody Ketterling the Third." He holds out his hand and the two of them shake for what seems like ages.

Derek is practically laughing in his face. "The Third, huh? A long line of Brody Ketterlings, I take it?"

“Yeah. Something funny about that?”

“Not at all. Not at all. My grandparents probably cleaned your grandparents’ toilets.”

“Cool story, bro.” Brody turns away from him and makes a face like the guy is a tool. Natalia looks like she wants to just disappear.

Raine taps my shoulder. “This is soooo lame. Let’s get out of here. Brody and Natalia can stay with that guy --” she wrinkles her nose in distaste – “if they want.”

I nod, then dig into my wallet and drop a fifty on the table. Raine grabs my hand.

“Come on, Cam.”

“We’re coming, too,” Natalia says, as Brody adds some money to the total. The waitress comes over and picks it all up, scowling.

A moment later the four of us are outside, about to get into our cars and depart.

It’s pretty awkward.

“You’re lucky there are ladies present, Elliot,” Brody says to me.

“Come on man, it was a game of darts,” I say, shaking my head and realizing how stupid we’re both acting. “Just let it go already.”

“Stop being a punk,” he says. “You should apologize to Natalia for ruining brunch.”

“He doesn’t have to apologize. Can we just pretend it didn’t happen?” She wipes a strand of hair from her face and Brody looks down at her, all fake concerned, puts a hand on her shoulder.

That should be me, I think, but I shake the feeling off. Sling my arm over Raine's shoulder instead. She instantly moves closer to me.

"So who was that douche in there?" I ask Natalia.

"Just some guy from my old school. He's nobody."

"Is that the type of person you used to hang out with before Brody?" Raine says.

"If so, congrats on stepping up like a hundred rungs on the social ladder."

"I barely knew him."

"Whatever." Raine sighs like she's totally over it. "Well, thanks for inviting us to eat, Brody. It was...nice."

Brody looks confused and I panic, not wanting him to mention that I invited them.

"We should definitely do this again sometime," I say. "Have your people call our people."

And then I quickly open the passenger door and usher Raine into the car. As I walk around the other side I see Natalia's face. She looks positively ashen. Like really shaken up. She keeps looking back toward the bar.

I know there's more to the story with that Derek guy than she's telling.

But I get in the car and we drive off.

Raine is reapplying some makeup and fixing her hair as we drive back to her house.

“Ugh, that was so not a good time. Brody is a total idiot, I forgot how annoying he can be,” she says, fixing her eyeliner.

“Yeah. And he calls me a punk.”

“You think you could take him in a fight?”

I glance at her. She says it like she’s genuinely curious and not caring much more way or the other. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“That doesn’t sound very confident, Cam.” She drops her eyeliner back into her purse “I’ll bet if I asked Brody he’d say that he could take you. Without a doubt.”

“So what? That’s like when we play some football team and they all talk trash leading up to the game. I never say a word and I’m not always sure what’s going to happen—but we stomp them just the same.”

“True.” She thinks about it, and then her face breaks into a smile. “That’s pretty hot, actually. The whole quiet confidence thing.”

We’re both silent for a bit. I still feel really tired this morning. Just can’t seem to get any energy going. I wonder if it has anything to do with fainting. Could I really be getting sick?

I tell myself not to be paranoid.

A few minutes later I drop Raine off and we kiss briefly. Then I go home and crash. I sleep until the early evening.





# Chapter Five

## Natalia

When Brody and I get outside of the restaurant, I'm not doing so well. Seeing Derek in there threw me for a loop, but I'm trying not to show how rattled I am. The last thing I want is Brody asking tons of questions about who Derek is. I'm not ready to talk about that, and besides, it's none of his business. We make conversation on the way home, but not about much. He seems a little tense after his fight with Cam, and after a few minutes of awkward conversation, we lapse into silence until he drops me off in front of my house.

Once I'm inside, I head upstairs and run a bath, letting the water get as hot as I can stand. I pour in tons of bath salts and bubbles, and soak until the water's gone lukewarm and my fingers are wrinkles. Then I wrap myself in a pair of cozy sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and warm socks and head to my bed for a nap. The whole morning was exhausting.

I must have been asleep longer than I thought, because when I wake up, late afternoon light is filtering through the blinds, and someone's ringing the doorbell.

I stumble downstairs and fling open the door, figuring it's my mom. She had to work today, and she's notorious for forgetting her key. But it's not my mom. It's Cam.

Standing on my doorstep, his hands in his pockets. He gives me a sheepish smile.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi," I say, suddenly aware of the fact that I'm wearing sweatpants and have behead. I reach up and swipe at my hair, trying to smooth it down.

"Sorry to just show up," he says, "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

“I’m fine,” I say, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seemed a little upset at the restaurant,” he says. “Who the hell was that dude?” It’s the way he says it, so simple, like he’s just curious, with no trace of judgment. I wonder if I should tell him, if I can trust him. But before I can decide, he says, “Can I come in?”

I hesitate and look over my shoulder into the house. I want to trust him, I do, but I don’t even know him. He must sense my hesitation, because he says, “Are you hungry? We could go somewhere.”

“Sure,” I say, “Just give me a second to change.”

Twenty minutes later, we’re sitting on a bench outside of the mall, eating burgers and fries from Johnny Rocket’s. The food is greasy and delicious, the air is cool but nice, and for some reason, the fact that it’s starting to get dark out just makes the whole scene even better.

“So,” Cam says, reaching into the cardboard box of fries that’s sitting between us.

“Are you going to tell me who that guy was?”

“Just this guy I knew from my old school.” I shrug, like it’s no big deal.

He takes a sip of his chocolate shake and thinks about it. “Boyfriend?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

“Bad break up?”

“You could say that.”

“What happened?”

“We... we went out for a few months, and then when we broke up, he started all these rumors about me.” I hope he doesn’t ask me what kind of rumors, because I really don’t want to get into the things Derek told everyone, the names I got called, the way the girls, even the ones I thought were my friends, turned on me, the way everyone started looking at me differently.

But Cam just nods. “What a scumbag. I’m sorry you had to run into him like that.”

“Yeah,” I say, “It kind of sucked.” I take a deep breath. “So now that I answered one of your questions, you have to answer one of mine.”

“Shoot.”

“What’s up with you and Brody?”

“Me and Brody?” His tone is light and nonchalant, but I sense a certain tension in his body as he takes another fry.

“Yeah,” I say, “The fighting?”

“He was being an asshole,” he says simply, and shrugs, like it should be obvious.

“And so you decided to put him in a headlock?”

“A headlock?” he says, grinning. “Is that what you thought that was?”

“I don’t know,” I say, “Aren’t guy always putting each other in headlocks?”

“Maybe the pus—the wimps,” he says. “But what I did to Brody wasn’t a headlock.”

“So what was it then?”

“Nothing,” he says, “That dude from your old school broke it up before either one of us could do anything.”

“Okay,” I say, “But still. What’s the deal?”

“I told you, he was – “

“I know, being an asshole. Do you guys usually get so mad at each other? I mean, I thought you guys were best friends.”

“We are,” he says, “Me, him, and my friend Aiden have been friends forever.

But sometimes Brody can be...” He sighs and leans back on the bench, then readjusts the baseball hat he’s wearing. “He can be an asshole.”

“You already said that.”

“It’s complicated,” he says.

“Then why still hang out with him?”

“Why are you hanging out with him?” he counters.

“He’s nice.” I shrug. “At least, he is to me.”

He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it. “What?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Cam,” I say, “If you know something about Brody, then you should tell me.”

He looks at me, and then finally, he sighs. He pulls his hat off and turns it around, so that he’s wearing it backwards. He leans forward, his elbows on his knees, and

looks up at me, his face serious. "It's probably not a big deal," he says,

"But when he found out I was supposed to take you to Raine's party, he showed up at my house and told me not to."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

I feel like there's more to the story, but I have a feeling that if I press him, he might shut down. So instead I just say, "So you think Brody's just being nice to me because he thought you liked me?"

"I don't know." He's still looking at me, his eyes searching. A breeze flows through, ruffling my hair, and I shiver, wrapping my arms closer around me. "Do you like him?" he asks softly.

"I'm not sure," I say honestly, "He's been really nice to me."

"I've been really nice to you, too." He's moving closer to me, and his lips are right there, soft-looking and kissable. My heart speeds up and I want to look away from him, but I can't. "I've been very nice to you. I came over to check on you, didn't I? I don't see Brody anywhere around."

His lips are just a few centimeters away now, and he moves even closer and tries to kiss me. But I turn my head, even though it takes all my self-control. "You have a girlfriend," I tell him. I'm staring down at the ground now, trying not to look at him, trying to stop what I know is about to happen.

"Raine's not my girlfriend," he says.

I look at him then, and before I know it, his lips are on mine, sweet and soft and amazing. I lean into the kiss, not worrying about anything, just letting myself fall

into him. His hands are in my hair and on my neck and on my face, and I don't think about what it means or what's going to happen. I just think about how it feels. And how it feels is perfect.





# Chapter Six

## Campbell

Okay. I have to face facts. Kissing Natalia is way more fun than kissing Raine.

Like, there's really no comparison. Raine is hot and all, but somehow when we make out it's...kind of...lame. No, not lame. It's just lame when I put it side by side with how kissing Natalia feels.

I could make out with Natalia for hours. But we stop after a few minutes and just hold hands under the bench outside of the mall.

"What are we doing?" she says, sounding a little panicked.

I laugh. "We're getting up and walking to my car. Come on." We stand up and I grab her hand again.

On the ride back to her house, we talk a little bit, listen to the radio, and sometimes we're just quiet. But it's not an awkward kind of silence. It's like we've known each other for years and don't need to fill every second with chatter.

Finally we get back to her house and I put the car in park and let it idle.

Natalia looks at me with those dark, serious eyes. "This could be bad."

"How so?"

"Ummm...you and Raine. Me and Brody?"

I sigh. "I thought you and Brody weren't officially an item. And I told you that Raine and I aren't."

“You know what I mean.”

“We’re not doing anything wrong.”

She bites her lower lip nervously, which I find very cute.

“Well, I should go,” she says. “But I had a lot of fun.”

“So did I. Glad I took the chance and dropped by.”

“Me too.” She starts to open the door.

“Hey,” I say.

She waits for a moment. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want you to think that I’m going to be like that jerk, Derek. I’d never spread rumors or talk about you to anyone. Ever.”

Natalia smiles. “I know you wouldn’t. But thanks.”

I want to say more. For a moment, I want to say a whole lot more. But I chicken out and she leaves. When the car door slams shut, I sit there and watch her move up the front walkway to her house. She looks back once and waves before going inside.

I wait a second after her front door closes before putting the car in gear and pulling onto the street. On the way home all I can think about is kissing her. Being with her and how right it felt.

The rest of the night I want to call her. Text her. Something.

But I resist. Instead I watch a string of movies and try not to think about Natalia.

And fail miserably.

The next day is even harder. I wake up thinking about her. In fact, I'm pretty sure I had a dream about her. Something to do with butterflies. A whole bunch of them fluttering and flying around in this field where I was trying to find her. I was calling her name but couldn't see where she was.

Weird dream.

"Cam, you promised you'd help with the garage today," my mom says as I sit downstairs on Sunday morning, channel surfing and eating a bowl of cereal.

Normally I'd bitch about it and try and get her to let me do it some other weekend. But now I consider that maybe it'll help me keep my mind off Natalia.

So I change into sweatpants and a t-shirt and go out to the garage with mom barking orders at me. I make it my mission to do everything she says without complaint.

I'm sweating and we're getting a lot done. Then, in one quiet moment when mom leaves to get us water, I can't take it anymore. I pull out my cell.

I have three unread text messages.

Natalia? I think, my heart beating a little faster.

But no. One is from Aiden.

So what am I now? Chopped liver?

I grimace. It's going to take some time for me to make this up to him. Maybe it will mean really giving him a play by play of Friday night and every little thing that went

down. Except for my little fainting spell. Nobody needs to know that happened.

And then there are two texts from Raine.

Hey cutie.

And then, just a few minutes ago:

Ugh. So bored.

Shit. I can't ignore her completely. That would be weird. So I send her a text and tell her that I'm having a terrible time helping my mom in the garage. Raine responds that I'm a sweetheart and how sexy it is when a boy does manly work.

But I don't really want to continue the conversation so I go right back to working, deciding it wouldn't be right to text Natalia until after I talk to Raine. When the garage is finally done, it's time for dinner. I've killed off most of the day and managed not to go insane thinking about Natalia.

But I cave in right before going to sleep that night. Somehow I just can't go another night without trying to talk to her. So I send her a quick text good night text while lying in my bed. Then I put the phone down on the nightstand and try to close my eyes and go unconscious.

A buzzing sound startles me.

A response from Natalia.

Hey.

My heart is beating again. I have a huge, ridiculous grin on my face. Thank god nobody I know can see me right now. I type fast.

*I've been thinking.*

*About?*

*About me & you.*

*What about us?*

*I hesitate. Best to just say it straight.*

*I like u. A lot.*

*Don't say that.*

*But it's true.*

*Still...*

*Maybe u and me can hang.*

*What abt Brody? And Raine?*

*Do u like him?*

*She better not say yes.*

*Not the way I like you.*

*My grin is back, bigger than ever.*

*Okay. So we need to just let them know.*

*I'm a little scared.*

*Don't be. I'll take care of it.*

*Promise?*

*Promise.*

A little while later we say goodnight and I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

But reading back the string of texts in the cold light of Monday morning, I start to feel a faint stirring of regret. I said a lot of stuff. Of course I meant it, but those are some mighty big words. Especially about taking care of everything. After all, I can't really stop Raine from going ballistic nuts when she finds out that I like Natalia more than her.

It could get ugly.

But when I get to our hallway before first period, I see something strange. The Triad is all gathered around Natalia's locker, and Natalia is talking with them. Laughing.

At first I think I must be seeing things, but no. It's true. Raine and Natalia are gabbing away like best friends reunited after five years apart. I mean, if I didn't know better I'd think the Triad was a Quad.

When Natalia sees me, she shoots me a look like, "don't come over here" and then looks away quickly. What the fuck?

"What's it feel like to be a total self-centered asshole who drops his friends when he makes the big time?"

I turn around and see Aiden standing there.

“Holy shit!” I say, slapping my forehead. “I totally forgot to pick you up.”

“Oh, I understand. After all, we’ve only done the same thing every day for two straight years. Why would you remember?”

“Dude, I’m sorry. It was totally an accident.”

“Yeah. Sure.” He slaps me on the back. “Hope you had a good weekend, lady killer.”

“Aiden, come on, man.”

As he walks off, Natalia and the Triad are still babbling away at her locker.

This day is like something out of The Twilight Zone, I think, shaking my head at the ridiculousness of it all.

“It’s okay to be confused. Basic math does that to me all the time.” Brody nods at me from his locker across the hall.

I chuckle appreciatively. “It’s not math, just...life.”

“Oh, right. What about life exactly?”

“Aiden’s mad at me.”

Brody’s in a great mood for some reason. Acting like his old self. He comes over and leans against the wall near me.

“Look, I was thinking about this stuff with me and you,” he says. He shifts his books to his other arm. “I want to squash it, bro. It’s stupid. We’ve been friends way too long.”

I hesitate, but not long. “Me too. I’ve got no beef with you.” I think about coming clean now, about telling him about what happened with Natalia. But out of the corner of my eye, I see her heading down the hall with The Triad, and I decide I need to talk to her before I do anything stupid.

“See how easy that was?” Brody says. “I’m so reasonable it’s crazy.”

“If only Aiden will forgive me, we can get back to the way things used to be.”

“He’ll get over it, man. After all, if you and me can get past this shit, I’m sure that dude will forgive you. What’s he got his panties in a bunch about now?”

“I forgot to pick him up for school today.”

Brody laughs. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” I hang my head in shame.

“Dude lives two houses down from you!” He cackles even more and it turns into a laugh that builds in intensity. Next thing I know, we’re both laughing so hard we’re almost crying.

“I probably drove right by him while he was standing out there,” I gasp. Just picturing it sends us into a new round of hysterics.

Finally we get a hold of ourselves. Brody grows serious. “Look, dude. I just want you to know. No matter what, you’ll always be my boy.”

“Thanks man.”

We give each other a pound and then head to class.

And honestly, the whole thing’s making me really second-guess any ideas I had



about making Natalia and me official. I mean, Brody's my boy and Natalia just moved here. Not to mention that she's finally starting to make friends, and now I'm going to screw it all up for her? I need to find a time to talk with her so we can figure all this out.

As cool as she is, as much as I'd like for us to be able to hang, I'm just not sure it's going to work. Not now. Maybe not ever.



# Chapter Seven

## Natalia

So when I get to school on Monday, Raine's waiting for me at my locker. Along with Becca and Teri. So not what I wanted to be dealing with first thing on a Monday morning. Actually, if I'm being honest, so not what I wanted to deal with, like, ever.

Especially after texting with Cam all last night. And especially after kissing him on Saturday. The thought of it makes warmth rush to my lips.

"Hey!" Raine yells, waving me over. "Natalia! Come here!"

I look around for Cam, since he promised he was going to be the one dealing with this, but he's nowhere to be found. For a moment, I wonder if maybe he's already told her, if now her and her friends are inviting me over so that they can kick my ass.

But when I get there, they're still all smiles.

"So Becca was just talking about how we should all go get our hair cut after school," she says, smiling. "Her aunt owns this, like, amazing spa."

"Seriously, it's amazing," Teri agrees. "And she gives us whatever we want for ridiculously cheap."

"Wow," I say slowly, twirling the combination on my locker and trying to stall for time. "That does sound amazing." It actually kind of doesn't, since spas kind of intimidate me. Not that I've ever been to one. But from what I've seen on TV, they seem super ritzy.

"You can come," Becca says, not really sounding that thrilled about it. Her hands are flying over her phone as she texts someone.

“Well, that’s really nice, you guys,” I say. I’m about to make up some excuse about why I can’t go when I see Cam walking down the hall. Our eyes meet, and sparks fly from mine to his. I know that sounds completely overdramatic, but it’s true. His eyebrows shoot up, questioning, like ‘what the hell are you doing talking to Raine?’ and I give him a look, like ‘no, don’t come over here.’

He needs to talk to Raine in private, and not while she’s standing at my locker.

Who knows what this girl’s going to do? If she decides to go postal, the last thing I want is to be in striking distance.

“So you’ll go then?” Teri asks. I realize I forgot to make up an excuse.

“Um, well...”

“It’s settled!” Raine says, jumping up and down and clapping her hands. “We’ll meet you after school in front of the gym doors.” She reaches out and picks up a strand of my hair, turning it over in her fingers. She wrinkles her nose. “You are definitely getting highlights.”

And then the three of them are chattering away about the different kinds of highlights you can get, partial foil versus full foil, and how the regenerating facial is better than the cleansing one. I turn around to look for Cam, and when I spot him, he’s over on the other side of the junior hall, talking to Brody. Brody? What the fuck? I wonder if he’s telling him about what happened. But as I watch, the two of them are laughing away like old friends, and my heart sinks into my shoes.

“Come on,” Raine says, grabbing my hand. “Walk with us to homeroom.”

And before I can protest, she’s dragging me down the hall behind her.

I spend the morning hoping Cam will text me, even though I know it's probably a ridiculous hope. He's turning out to be an asshole, just like every other guy I've known.

I should have known better than to believe him when he said he would take care of everything. It's obvious from the way he was acting with Brody that he has no intention of doing that.

At lunch, I fill my tray with salad and an apple from the lunch line, and then look around the cafeteria, having no idea where to sit. I see Raine over in the corner, holding court at her table, but she doesn't see me. Brody's not there yet, and neither is Cam, and besides, I really don't want to be sitting with either one of them.

So when Adrianna yells, "Hey, Natalia! Over here!" I gratefully make my way through the caf and plunk down at the table, across from her and Chelsey.

"What's up?" Adrianna says, "How was your weekend?"

"It was fine," I say, opening up my Diet Coke and hoping she doesn't ask for too many details. I have a feeling she's not going to think it was the best idea that I was hanging out with Cam and Raine. And honestly, she's probably right.

"Did you do anything fun?" Chelsey asks.

"Not really." I shrug.

And then, out of nowhere, Raine stands up and starts screaming my name. Like, seriously screaming it across the cafeteria. "Natalia!" she yells, "Natalia, we're sitting over here!" Becca and Teri look up from their cell phones, give me half-waves, and then go back to texting.

Adrianna and Chelsey's mouths drop open in unison.

“Please tell me you didn’t become friends with Raine Marsden,” Adrianna says.

“She’s so super toxic,” Chelsey adds.

“I’m not friends with her,” I say, giving Raine a wave and pretending I can’t hear her, even though she’s screaming her face off. “We just hung out a little bit this weekend.”

“You just hung out a little bit this weekend?” Chelsey says. “You don’t just ‘hang out a little bit’ with Raine Marsden.”

“We did,” I say, shrugging like it was no big deal. “We just, you know, hung out and um, probably we won’t ever talk again.”

“Hi!” Raine says. I turn around and there she is, standing at the head of our table, looking perky. She sits down on the bench next to me, then reaches over and grabs a carrot off of my salad and pops it into her mouth. “How come you’re not sitting with us?”

“Um, I didn’t... I mean, I wasn’t – ”

“Are you avoiding Brody?” she asks. “After he kissed you?” I open my mouth to protest, but she rolls her eyes like there’s no use denying it. “You don’t have to worry.

He left school early today. Something to do with his older sister.”

“His older sister?” I repeat. Across the table, Chelsey and Adrianna’s mouths are practically on the floor.

“Yeah, she’s a total nut job,” Raine says, “Like, always in and out of rehabs and

stuff. His parents are completely wrecked about it.” She helps herself to another carrot.

“Anyway, we’re cutting out to go to Taco Bell. You want to go with?”

“Um, no thanks,” I say, and resist the urge to ask her if Cam’s going, too. “I don’t think I should be getting in trouble on my second day of school.”

She shrugs. “Suit yourself. See you after school!” She flounces out, not once acknowledging Adrianna or Chelsey, who exchange a look after she’s gone.

“Okay, look,” Adrianna says carefully, “We hardly know you.”

“And you hardly know us,” Chelsey adds, “But you should know that Raine Marsden – “

“--- is not the kind of girl you want to be hanging out with,” Adrianna finishes.

“You guys,” I say, “Trust me, it’s fine. I’m not going to be hanging out with her.” Especially not after I kissed her boyfriend.

“All right,” Adrianna says skeptically, exchanging another one of those looks with Chelsey, “But don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

\*\*\*

When the bell rings at the end of the day, I grab the books I need for my homework and think about how I’m going to get out of this whole spa excursion. I decide to just head home, and then text Raine later, claiming I was sick.

I rush outside to the student parking lot and am about to get in my mom’s car -- which she let me borrow since she had the day off--when someone comes up to me from behind. Cam.

“Hi,” he says. He has on the same baseball hat from the other night, and his blue eyes look droopy and sexy. His face is a little scruffy, and he’s wearing jeans, a plain long-sleeved gray t-shirt, and scuffed up sneakers. He looks amazing, and I think again about how it felt to kiss him. But I’m pissed. Too pissed to let my hormones take over.

“Leaving,” I say, hitting the button on the key fob to unlock the car doors.

“Hey, wait,” he says, stepping in front of me. “What’s going on? You didn’t text me all day.”

“Ohh, no,” I say, “Don’t put this on me. You didn’t text me all day. And you weren’t in study hall.”

“I had a football meeting,” he says, “And no, I didn’t text you. Not after I saw you talking with Raine this morning.”

“Hmm,” I say, crossing my arms in front of me. “Was that before or after you and Brody become bosom buddies in front of his locker?”

“Did you just say ‘bosom buddies’?” he asks, the side of his lips tugging up into a grin.

“Don’t try to change the subject!” I say.

“Look,” he says, “I thought I’d wait for you to tell me how you wanted to handle things. I saw you with Raine, and then me and Brody made up, and I just thought... I don’t know, that it might not be the best idea for us to tell them.”

I can’t believe he just said that. He wants to have his cake and eat it too! It’s so typical, it’s almost sad. “Again, leaving,” I say, trying to step around him. But then I remember something. “Actually,” I say, “I’m not.”



“You’re not what?” Cam asks, looking confused.

“I’m not leaving. I’m going to the spa with Raine.”

“You’re going where with who?”

“You heard me,” I tell him. Ha! He’s not the only one who can have a bosom buddy. Or whatever they’re calling them these days.

I’m hoping to see his face crumple up with sadness, but instead, he’s looking over my shoulder, alarmed.

“What is it?” I ask him, whirling around. I half expect to see Raine and Brody walking across the parking lot together, maybe followed by Teri and Becca and some guys from the football team, ready to confront me and Cam about our kiss. But it’s not an angry mob I see. It’s just one person. One guy. Derek.

He’s loping across the lot, his long legs covering the distance between my car and his in about ten seconds. There’s nowhere to go. He’s already seen me. Cam steps in front of me, but Derek ignores him, his gaze landing squarely on me.

“Hey, Natalia,” he says, “Can I talk to you?”

Before I can answer, Cam takes a step forward. “No,” he says, and his tone sounds like a warning. “You can’t.”

## **RUMORED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book Three)**

by Lauren Barnholdt & Aaron Gorvine

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental



# Chapter One

## Natalia

Derek looks at Cam like he can't believe it. Honestly, I can't really believe it either. I mean, Cam's acting like I'm his property or something, telling Derek he can't talk to me. Which is ridiculous given the big fight Cam and I just got into. Well, if you count Cam trying to talk to me and me telling him to leave me alone a big fight, which I do.

"Who says I can't talk to her?" Derek asks, moving closer to Cam.

"I do," Cam says. And then *he* takes another step.

"Relax, dude," Derek says, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I just want to have a conversation with her, that's all."

"Right," Cam says sarcastically, "She told me about the shit you did. Now get the fuck out of here."

"Don't stick up for me," I say to Cam. "I don't need it." As much as I don't want to talk to Derek, after what Cam did to me – kissing me on Saturday, then texting me last night and telling me how much he liked me and how he would take care of everything with Brody and Raine, then totally going back on it today – he doesn't have the right to be sticking up for me. He's just as bad as Derek.

Cam turns and looks at me, his eyes hurt, but he doesn't say anything.

"You heard her, man," Derek says, "She doesn't need you."

Cam glances at him, then back at me. He still looks hurt, and for I second, I *want* him to stick up for me. I want him to pull me close, to usher me into his car, to drive me away and kiss me the way he did on Saturday night.

“Natalia,” he says, “I’m not leaving you alone with this guy.”

My heart feels like it’s being torn in two. As much as I want him to stay, I know that when it comes down to it, thinking I can depend on Cam is just going to hurt more.

“You should go, Cam,” I say, forcing my chin into the air. “This is none of your business.”

He keeps his gaze on me for a long moment, and it takes all my self-control not to tell him to stay. But I stand my ground, and before I can change my mind, he turns on his heel and walks away. He doesn’t look back. He doesn’t say anything. He just keeps striding across the parking lot, leaving me alone with Derek.

“That your boyfriend?” Derek asks, leaning back against my car.

“No.”

“That other guy was? From the weekend? Body Dickhead the Fifth or whatever?”

“No.”

“Listen,” he says, “I didn’t come here to be an asshole.”

“Really?” I say, “Because showing up at someone’s school and accosting them in the parking lot seems pretty assholeish to me.”

“Natalia,” he says, “I wanted to say I’m sorry. What I did, that was...” He trails off, like he wants me to say something, but I don’t. I don’t tell him that what he did wasn’t that bad, I don’t tell him that I forgive him, I don’t tell him it was just stupid high school bullshit. In fact, I *want* to hear him to say how horrible it was. I want him to take responsibility for what he did.

But before he can, Raine's voice comes trilling across the parking lot. "There you are!" Becca and Teri are trailing behind her, their usual bored looks replaced with ones that fall halfway between boredom and annoyance. "We said to meet in front of the – "

She stops when she sees Derek. "Ewww," she says, "What is *he* doing here?"

"I came to talk to Natalia," he says. He looks her up and down. "Nice shoes."

Raine's eyes narrow into two little slits. "These shoes," she hisses, "Are Christian Louboutins. Although I wouldn't expect someone like you to understand what that means."

"Save it," he says, shaking his head like he can't believe how ridiculous she is.

"Natalia, can we get out of here? Go for a coffee or something? Please? We need to talk."

Raine walks over and slings her arm over my shoulder. Becca comes to stand on the other side of me, and Teri stands on the other side of Raine.

"Natalia?" Derek pleads.

"I can't," I say, "I have plans."

"She has plans," Raine repeats, talking in that same slow voice she used the other day at the restaurant when she asked me if I'd kissed Brody. "And she doesn't want to talk to you. So now you're going to walk away, and leave her alone."

Derek opens his mouth, like he's about to say something, but then he shuts it.

"Fine," he says. And then he turns around and walks away.

“Wow,” I say, impressed. “How did you do that?”

“I really do not like that guy,” Raine says, ignoring my question. She shudders.

“Is he, like, your stalker?” Becca asks.

“I like his tattoo,” Teri adds. “It’s kind of sexy.”

Raine glares at her. “Come on,” she says to us. “We’re going to be late for our appointments.”

\*\*\*

The spa turns out to be just like I pictured it, with lots of white walls and open spaces. Modern art in shades of turquoise and green adorns the walls, and huge white vases filled with purple orchids sit on glass tables. A woman with smooth black hair and perfect skin doesn’t even ask who we are when Raine tells her we’re all going to start with pedicures – she just whisks us back into a private room where there are four massage chairs set up in a circle.

We all sit down, and two gorgeous women with the same smooth hair and flawless skin start up the whirling foot baths, adding salts and potions to the water. I slip my feet into the warm, delicious bubbles, letting them swirl over my skin. A magazine is slipped into my hands, a glass of water with cucumber placed on the table beside me.

Everything feels so good that I’m starting to think it might be worth it to be here, even if it means spending time with the Triad.

“So why does that guy keep following you?” Raine asks, flipping through an US Weekly. “Is he, like, in love with you or something?”

“You must be really good in bed,” Teri says, giggling.

I feel my face flush red, and I shrug. “He’s just an ex-boyfriend,” I say, “He was a jerk, and when I broke up with him, he couldn’t handle it.”

“Ugh, I hate when they get like that,” Becca says, nodding. “Last year I almost had to get a restraining order on this senior who, like, would not get the hint.”

“He probably had a hard time getting the hint after you gave him a blow job in the locker room during gym,” Teri says, exchanging a look with Raine. They both grin.

“Teri!” Becca throws her magazine at her. “I did not!”

“Just own it, Becca,” Raine says, rolling her eyes. “So you blew him. Who cares?”

“I do, because I didn’t!”

“I’m so sick of everyone being embarrassed about stuff like that,” Raine says, still flicking the pages of her magazine. “Aren’t you, Natalia?”

“Um, stuff like what?” I ask, not sure exactly where she’s going with this conversation, but somehow sensing I need to be on guard.

“Sex stuff,” she says. She reaches for the glass of water on the table next to her, and takes a slow sip. “Like when I asked you about kissing Brody and you didn’t want to tell me.”

“I don’t know,” I say, shifting on my chair, suddenly very uncomfortable. “I guess it’s just one of those things I think you shouldn’t really talk about.”

“Why not?” Raine asks. “You better believe the guys are talking about it.” She sets her magazine down, and stares at me. “Is it because of Cam?”



“Cam?” I say. Suddenly, I’m hot. The water in my foot bath feels like it’s burning up, and I resist the urge to pull my feet out. *Stop*, I tell myself, *it’s just a panic attack. You’re fine*. I try to concentrate on taking deep breaths.

“Yeah,” Raine says, “Cam.” She’s talking in her slow voice.

“Do you like him?” Becca asks. She’s looking at me now, too. In fact, they’re all looking at me with these stares, these piercing stares, their magazines forgotten.

“No,” I say, forcing a laugh. “Of course not.”

“You’re lying,” Raine says.

“She’s definitely lying,” Teri says. “She likes him. Don’t you, Natalia?”

“No!” I say. “I don’t.” I can hardly hear now, because of the whirring sound in my ears. It’s the same sound that was in my head that day at Raine’s house, right after Brody kissed me.

“Natalia,” Raine says, and when I pull my gaze up to hers, it’s like she locks onto my eyes and I can’t look away. “I know you like Cam.”

“I never said that,” I say, but the whooshing sound is louder now, like all the foot baths have been put on high, and it’s echoing in my head. And now I’m confused. Did I tell Raine that I like Cam?

“I know you like Cam,” she repeats, “And we can’t have that. He’s mine, okay, Natalia? You should be with Brody. Brody knows what’s best for you.”

I don’t know why, but now her face is staring to blur a little bit, and for some reason, a butterfly is dancing in front of her eyes. I blink hard a couple of times, and I’m about to tell her okay, that she’s right, that I like Brody. I *do* like Brody, he’s cute and nice and smart and he kissed me. But Cam... Oh, God, Cam...

Kissing Cam was like nothing I've ever felt, and I remember the way his hands felt on my face and on my skin, his lips gently grazing mine, soft at first and then more insistent.

I don't know what's come over me, and I open my mouth to tell Natalia that I like Cam, not Brody, but the whirling won't stop, why won't it stop I like Cam and I should tell her.

"I don't like Brody," I say, and it comes out sharper than I intended.

And that's when the lights go out.

There's a sound like a plug's being pulled, then darkness, and finally, the sound of the whirling water stops. Becca screams and I'm breathing hard, and there's the shuffle of feet and it's pitch black.

From somewhere down the hall I can hear low voices, and then I feel the brush of something soft—it feels like wings, like butterfly wings, but that makes no sense — against my cheek, and I push it away with the back of my hand.

The lights pop back on again. I blink, feeling like I'm hungover.

"Ohmigod," Teri says. She's flicking through her magazine like nothing happened. "That was soooo weird. And ridiculous that the power would go out at a place like this, don't they have, like, backup generators or something?"

"You need to talk to your aunt about that," Raine says, nodding her agreement.

"For sure."

"Um, guys?" Becca says. Her tone is urgent, and I turn to look at her, still trying to shake the weird groggy feeling that's come over me. Becca's clutching her cheek,

and when she pulls her hand down, there's an ugly red scratch on her face, zigzagging across her skin angrily.

"Ohmigod, Becca!" Raine cries. "What the hell happened to your face?"

"Natalia," Becca says, raising her finger to point at me, her eyes shiny with tears.

"Natalia did it."



# Chapter Two

## Campbell

I go to football practice and act like everything's totally cool. Brody and me are back to being buds and I try to crack a few jokes so he doesn't pick up that I'm actually in one of the worst moods of my life.

It helps that I put a couple of major hits on people during a quick scrimmage between the offense and defense.

But the whole time, I keep replaying the way Natalia talked to me earlier, the stuff she said. "*You should go.*" As I was trying to protect her from that creepy dude she supposedly hates. "*This is none of your business.*"

None of my business that some maniac stalker who you said lied about you and spread rumors—came around to bother you while I was standing right there? And I'm supposed to just leave you alone with him?

I picture myself saying all of this to her. I can't believe she treated me like that when all I've tried to do since day one is be nice to her. Take care of her. She's the one who was talking to the Triad this morning. And she didn't even give me a chance to explain to her about me and Brody.

After practice I drive around for awhile and try to cool down. But it doesn't really help.

My jaw is so tight it feels like I'm going to grind my teeth into dust.

Finally, I can't drive around forever, so I head home. As I'm turning onto my street, I notice Aiden out in his driveway shooting hoops.

He sees me, takes a shot. Airball.

I pull up to the curb and get out. “Can you teach me to play like you?” I say with a grin.

“Nice. Really funny. Don’t bother trying to pretend like we’re still friends,”

Aiden says as he goes to pick up the ball.

“Come on, bro. I said I was sorry.” I walk over to where he’s standing with the basketball under his arm. He isn’t acting like himself. Aiden’s always goofing around, never taking anything seriously.

“I don’t really care. *Bro.*” He snorts and shakes his head. Dribbles a few times and shoots again. This time the ball careens off the backboard.

“You need to bend your legs more, and follow through—“

“Have you always been this big of a douche?” he says, collecting the rebound.

“Maybe.”

This time when he goes to take a layup (off the wrong foot), I block the shot and hold onto the ball.

“Asshole, give it back!”

I hold it up out of his reach.

He looks like he wants to throw a punch at me.

“Aiden. You know we’re going to be friends again at some point, so can we just skip all the fighting and make up already?”

“You’ve changed,” he says. His eyes actually look a little teary but I don’t say anything about it. I didn’t realize he was really this upset.

“I haven’t changed. I’m still the same guy I was before this ridiculous party at Raine Marsden’s house.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He grabs the ball out of my hands. Squeezes it and then chucks it hard against the garage door of his house. It makes a huge racket.

“What the hell? What’s your problem?”

“Me and you used to be tight,” he says. “We used to do everything together, go everywhere together. And then you got bigger than me. You’re like twice my size. It’s like you’re my older brother or something.”

“It’s not my fault I had a growth spurt, dude.”

“You play football. All the girls love you. And now you’re really starting to forget about me.”

“I forgot to pick you up. Once.”

“That new girl. She’s the one that really ruined everything. Ever since she got here, it’s like you can’t think about anything else.”

“Not true.”

He stares at me defiantly. “I know you, Cam. Better than anybody. You really like her, don’t you?”

I don’t answer. Right now I feel like I hate her. But I can’t say that. Because deep down, I know that he’s right. “Listen, I promise I’m going to be a better friend,” I tell him. “Starting now.”

Aiden sighs. He walks over and picks the basketball up off the driveway. "Sorry I freaked out. You must think I've gone off the deep end, huh?"

"You were born off the deep end, bro. That's what I like about you."

He smiles. I pass the ball to him.

"Come on, fourth quarter. Two minutes left, Celtics up by two."

We start to play.

After about an hour of hanging with Aiden, I go home. It's dark outside and my mom is in her office, doing some kind of financial crap. Filling out forms or something.

I putter around the house, eat, watch some TV. I keep having the urge to call Natalia. Try and figure out what went wrong. But then I remember. She's moving on.

Getting closer with Raine and the Triad. Talking with her ex. Telling me to get lost.

Calling isn't really an option.

My stomach has a big knot in it the whole night but somehow I manage to fall asleep, probably because I had such a hard practice.

But I keep my phone nearby just in case SHE calls me.

I'm having another dream. In this one, I'm being held down by these heavy chains. I'm lying on some stone table and these chains are like thousands of pounds. I feel totally weak and powerless. I know that I have to get up because Natalia's in trouble. She needs me. But I can't move. I start to yell for her, screaming until my



throat is raw and—

I'm awoken by a loud buzzing sound. I sit up in bed, my breathing deep and heavy, like I'm panting. My phone.

I check it. Raine.

She's calling me at...midnight?

I clear my throat and then answer. "Hey. What's up?"

"Did I wake you?"

"Sort of. But I'm awake now. Is everything okay?"

"I want to see you." Her voice is low, sexy.

I rub my eyes. "I want to..." I start to tell her I want to see her too, but then I think—do I? Do I really?

"Cam? You there?"

"Yeah. Sorry, just tired is all."

"I want to come over and see you."

"What, tonight? Now?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. Probably not a good idea. My mom would freak."

"I can handle your mom." She's insistent.

“I don’t know, Raine.”

“You want me, Cam. You want me to come over.”

Suddenly, I feel this weakness in my arms and a light feeling, kind of dizzy and fizzy in my head. Her voice seems louder somehow. “That might not be too bad,” I say, finally. It’s like my mouth just moves on its own.

“I’m outside. Let me in the back door,” she says.

The fizzy feeling in my head gets stronger. Everything seems confused. But she’s here. And I do want her here, I realize. I want to be with Raine.

“I’m coming down,” I tell her.

And then I get up and let her in the back door.

She’s wearing a super short black skirt, black high heels, and a sheer white top with no bra underneath. “Whoa…” I take a few steps backwards.

She laughs, grabs me by the hand. “Where’s your bedroom?”

“Upstairs, but…”

“Come on. Show me.”

My legs are a little rubbery, like I’m drunk. I laugh at how ridiculous I must look, walking like a sailor on a ship in the middle of the ocean. If Raine notices, she doesn’t say.

Once we get inside my room, she starts kissing me. It’s better than before, not quite as lame. But it still doesn’t feel like it does with me and Natalia.

She breaks the kiss and stares at me in the semi-darkness. “Do you love her?”

“Who?” My mouth feels slurry.

“Natalia. Do you?”

I lick my lips. “I feel weird.”

She pushes me onto the bed. I fall into it. It feels soft and warm. Raine gets on top of me. Looks down at me, and her eyes almost look like black holes with the shadow across her face. “Tell me, Cam.”

“Tell you...”

“Do you love her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you won’t love her,” she says leaning in and kissing my mouth, pressing her lips into mine. I feel like my breath is being sucked out. Like I cannot get any air.

Like I’m drowning. I try to tell her that I’m drowning, I’m dying.

The dream comes back to me. The one I was having when she woke me up. It’s as if I’ve stepped into that dream. I can’t move, I can’t speak. She kisses me and kisses me. Finally, she stops and gets off of me.

I can breathe again. I look up at her, and it’s as though she’s glowing in the darkness of my room, but I know that can’t be right. Must be the light reflected from the window.

“You love *me*, Cam. Don’t you?”

It's true, I realize. I do love her. She's beautiful, the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on. "I love you."

"And you'd do anything for me, anything to protect me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

I realize that I'm totally exhausted. I can barely keep my eyes open now. "Raine, I think I...I should go to sleep."

"I can let myself out, don't worry," she laughs. "Sleep tight, Cam."

And then everything fades out. I'm asleep before she even leaves my room.



# Chapter Three

## Natalia

The thing about rumors is that people want to believe them. It doesn't matter if the rumor makes no sense, if it's totally implausible, or if their gut tells them there's no way it can be true.

Which is why when Brody meets me at my locker on Tuesday morning and tells me that the Triad is on the warpath, spreading gossip about how I attacked Becca at the spa, I know everyone's going to fall for it.

"I can't believe it," I say, slamming my books into my locker one by one. Slam.

Slam. Slam. My chemistry text is taking the brunt of my anger.

"Wow," Brody says, watching me, "I didn't realize you were so violent."

"Only when I'm pissed," I say. I'm out of books now, so I start on my notebooks.

"Being pissed at the Triad is a waste of time," Brody says, "They don't care.

They have no conscience. It doesn't penetrate."

"I'm not mad at *them*," I say. "I'm mad at myself." Slam. Slam. Slam.

"Yourself? Why?"

"Because I should have known better." All of my things are in my locker now, and I pull out the couple of books I need for my morning classes, shove them into my bag, and then give my locker door one final good, hard slam.

"Whoa," Brody says, stepping between me and my locker. He puts his hands on

my arms. “Calm down, Rocky, we can’t have you destroying the junior hall.”

“I just can’t believe I let them trick me,” I say. “I *know* girls like that are trouble.

I didn’t even *want* to go to the stupid spa, but then...” I trail off, thinking about yesterday, about my fight with Cam in the parking lot, about Raine saving me from Derek.

“Then what?” Brody asks.

“Nothing.” I sigh. “It’s just frustrating that people have to be such assholes all the time.”

“Definitely,” he says, nodding. He leans in close to me, and I can smell his aftershave, something sweet and spicy and delicious. “So is it all a lie?”

“Is what all a lie?”

“Everything they’re saying. That you punched Becca because you like Cam.”

“They’re saying I *punched* her? The girl has a scratch on her face!”

“So you scratched her?” he asks, grinning.

“No! We were at the spa, getting pedicures, and the lights went out. Some kind of power outage or something.” I don’t mention the creepy stuff that happened, the way the three of them were looking at me before it happened, the whirring sound that wouldn’t get out of my head, or the fact that I kept seeing and feeling butterflies. “And when the lights came back on, Becca claimed that I’d scratched her.”

“Well, it’s morphed into punch,” Brody says, his grin widening. “Rumor has it you have a mean right hook.”

“Great.” I sigh. “Now I kind of wish that I *had* punched her. At least then I would have gotten something out of it.”

“Nah,” he says, “You’re a lover, not a fighter.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugs. “Just do. But what about the other part?”

“What other part?”

“The part about you liking Cam? Is that true?”

The question throws me off guard. I look at Brody. Brody looks at me, any sign of joking around disappearing from his face. “No,” I say, “No, I don’t like Cam.” Even saying his name makes my heart jump. But he made his choice. Raine. Not me.

“Good,” Brody says, nodding in satisfaction. He takes my bag out of my hand and starts walking with me toward my homeroom. “So does this mean you’ll hang out with me after school?”

“Depends,” I say, “Are you going to take me to a spa?”

“No.”

“Are you going to make up a rumor that I punched you?”

“No.” He considers. “Are you going to punch me?”

“Only if you try something.”

“Well, now that I can’t promise.”



The bell rings then, and he hands me my bag. “See you at lunch?”

“See you at lunch,” I say. And then I head into homeroom before I have a chance to run into the Triad.

\*\*\*

At lunch, I sit with Adrianna and Chelsey. They’ve heard the rumor about me and Becca, of course, but are nice enough not to mention that they tried to warn me about Raine Marsden. Brody sits with us, turning his back on his usual table, which makes me like him even more. Cam sits with Raine and the rest of Triad, not bothering to look over at me once. During study hall, I hole up in the library so that I won’t have to see him.

By the time the final bell rings, I feel exhausted. The day’s taken a lot out of me, and so when Brody comes up behind me, puts his hands over my eyes and says, “Guess who?” I’m almost tempted to tell him that I can’t hang out after all. But before I can, he’s taking my hand and pulling me down the hall and out to the parking lot.

It’s a warm day, in the mid-sixties, and so he drives us to Harvard Square. We order iced coffees from Café Crema and wander around for a while, poking into the shops and browsing through the Harvard bookstore.

“I cannot believe there are people who actually understand this stuff,” Brody says, picking up a law textbook and flipping through it.

“Well, they’ve had, like, three years to learn it,” I say. “And they’re constantly studying.”

“Still.” He shakes his head and runs his eyes down the page. “Glued to these books, learning all this useless information...What a waste of time.”

“Doesn’t your family expect you to do the same thing?” I tease. According to Adrianna and Chelsey, Brody comes from a long line of successful bankers. In his family, it seems like you’re expected to do one of two things – become a lawyer, or go into finance.

“Yes,” he says, putting the book back on the shelf. “But that doesn’t mean I have to listen.”

“So your family’s pretty chill about letting you do what you want?”

“Well, they’re not going to like it,” he says, “But they’ll support me.”

“That’s cool. My mom’s a lawyer, but she’s the same way. She wouldn’t care what I did.”

“What *do* you want to do?”

I think about it. “No idea,” I say, running my hand over the spine of the law books.

“Maybe something with kids? Like a child psychologist?”

He nods. “You’d be really good at that.” He says it like he means it, though, not like he’s just saying it to be polite. “Does that...I mean, do you want to go into psychology because of anything specific?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the way you kind of freaked out the other day,” he says. “At Raine’s?”

After I kissed you? I just thought that maybe you’d...had some experience in that area.”

“You’re asking if I’m in therapy?”

“Feel free to tell me to go fuck myself.”

I grin. “Go fuck yourself.”

He smiles back. “Fair enough.”

“No,” I say, “I’m not in therapy. Not anymore. I mean, I never really was, I just started having these weird panic attacks last year, and so my mom made me go see this woman a couple times so I could learn how to deal with them.” I shrug. “Not a big deal.”

Brody nods. “It’s good that you went to talk to someone. I think – ”

“Brody?” A girl’s voice comes from the end of the aisle, and Brody turns.

“Kaci?”

“Hey.” She’s small, tiny even, short and very skinny, with blonde hair so light it’s almost white. She’s wearing a pair of jeans and a baggy sweatshirt that swallows up her frame. A huge pair of black sunglasses are perched on her head. “I’m just... um, I’m out on a pass.”

“This is Natalia,” Brody says, stepping back. “Natalia, this is my sister, Kaci.”

“Hi,” she says. She gives me a smile, and I smile back, holding my hand out.

She hesitates, then takes it. When we shake, I can feel every bone in her fingers. And then I remember Raine telling me about Brody’s sister being in rehab.

“Natalia,” Brody says, “Can you give us a second?”

“Oh,” I say, “Of course. Sure.” I turn to Kaci and give her another smile. “It was nice

to meet you, Kaci.”

I walk around the bookstore for a few minutes, picking out a couple of cotton candy pink books from the front paperback tables to read for fun later, adding a few zombie books to round out the pile. I pay for my purchases and then circle back around to the law books where I left Brody with his sister.

As I get closer, I can hear voices. Arguing.

“Stop,” Kaci says, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I *do* know what I’m talking about,” Brody says, “And it’s going to happen.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Then you better step it up.”

He shakes his head and laughs at her incredulously. “Whatever, Kaci,” he says,

“You’re just going to have to trust me.”

He walks away from her, down the aisle, and I quickly backtrack and then head toward him, up another aisle, so he doesn’t know what I overheard.

“Hey,” he says when he sees me. He gives me a big smile, looking at my bag.

“Did you get some good stuff?”

“Yup,” I say, “No law books allowed. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he says, “Kaci’s, um.. she’s in the Cambridge Eating Disorder Clinic.

And she was out on a pass for a couple hours.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling awkward.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” he says. “So do you want to get an ice cream?”

“I’d love an ice cream,” I say.

But the light mood of the afternoon is gone, and by the time we’re done with our cones, we’re both ready to go home. Brody’s quiet on the ride, and I follow his lead, looking out the window, wondering what he was arguing with his sister about. It’s only when I’m getting out of his truck that I realize the whole time I was with Brody, I didn’t think about Cam once.



# Chapter Four

## Campbell

I'm exhausted. As if I've been up for a hundred straight hours and then downed a couple of sleeping pills on top of it. That's how I feel at the end of the school day.

A few times I had to go to the bathroom during class and actually splash cold water on my face to try and revive myself. It helped for all of about three seconds.

Which is why I'm back in the bathroom now, splashing even more cold water on my face. I've got practice in a little less than twenty minutes and I'd rather not be a zombie on the field.

"Hey, I've been looking for you."

The voice comes from behind me as I'm pressing the hard, scratchy paper towel against my wet face. I open my eyes and see Aiden standing at the entrance to the bathroom. He looks nervous.

"What's up?" I say, trying to find some energy, but my voice sounds croaky.

I ball up the paper towel and toss it at the waste basket. It doesn't even come close.

"You sound like you're coming down with a cold," he says.

"I feel like someone drugged me."

"Maybe they did." He smiles humorlessly.

"Don't be ridiculous. So why were you looking for me?"

He looks around as if someone might be listening.

I snort. “Dude, we’re standing in the boys’ bathroom and nobody’s around.

What do you think, the FBI is listening in on us or something? Homeland security?”

“It’s not funny. I’m kind of creeped out right now.”

“Just spill it. I’m tired, and I need to get to practice.” My phone starts buzzing as I say this and I pull it out.

Aiden gives me a funny look. “Let me guess. Raine?”

“So what if it is? First you didn’t like Natalia. Now you have a problem with Raine? Maybe you just want me all to yourself.”

“Fuck you, dude.” Aiden turns and starts to leave. I grab his shoulder.

“Hey, hey. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m not myself right now.”

Aiden turns around and folds his arms. “You’re lucky I’m such a good guy.”

“I am. You’re a great friend. Now tell me what you’ve been wanting to tell me already.”

“Okay. But believe me, I know it sounds crazy.”

“I’m sure. Go.”

“You know I have cooking class with the Triad, right?” he says.

“Now that you reminded me...yeah.”



“Well, I do. And like you, they pretty much don’t know I even exist. I’m usually at the station right behind them—“

“For obvious reasons,” I laugh.

“Whatever. I’m always behind them, and mostly they don’t say anything interesting. Just the usual crap about hot boys, girls they hate, whatever.” He waves his hand. “But today, we were cooking with red wine vinegar and they started making these little jokes. At first I couldn’t tell who they were talking about, but I’m pretty sure it was you.”

“What kind of jokes?”

He sighs. “I don’t know. Like, Raine poured some of it into a glass and Becca said ‘It looks like blood.’ And then Teri said, ‘What’s that Raine, your personal stash of Camerade?’ And then they all giggled and Raine told them to shut up.”

I get a chill. “Whatever. They’re just stupid girls.”

“It wasn’t just that, dude. It was the way they were acting. The way Raine looks today. Did you see her last night?”

I nod. “Yeah, she came over. So?”

“She came over and now look at you.”

“Don’t be stupid. Whatever they were saying, it’s just bullshit. Nobody did anything to me. I just have low blood sugar or something. Need a candy bar.”

“You need to be careful.” He holds out his arms and starts to walk backwards.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” And then he opens the door and leaves.

After that weird conversation, I'm still tired and I'm also distracted. Not a good recipe for being an example for my team at football practice.

When I miss my third tackle of the day, Coach Brown runs onto the field, screaming.

"What on God's green earth is wrong with you?" he shouts. Spit—and maybe a piece of gum?—flies out of his mouth.

"I don't know. Feeling...a little off," I say, shrugging.

"Feeling a little off? Are you on drugs? Is your brain turning to oatmeal?" His face is bright red. The other players and the assistant coaches are just standing there in awe, not daring to say a word or move a muscle.

I've never seen him get this pissed off before. I mean, he has a little temper, but this is just off the charts.

"Having a bad day I guess."

He grabs my facemask and pulls me towards him. "Didn't I tell you—didn't I JUST FUCKING TELL YOU to watch for the screen pass?"

"Yeah."

"And what did they run?"

"A screen pass."

"That's right. A goddamn screen pass. And where were you?"

"I wasn't reading the play correctly, sir."

“I told you the play. I told you and you still blew it and then you missed the tackle. Another missed tackle. You’re our team captain, our defensive leader, and you’re blowing tackles like a third string rookie.”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t give a shit about your apologies, Elliot. This Friday we’ve got a game against the toughest team in the division and you’re stinking the joint up. Unacceptable.

Totally unacceptable. I’ll bench your ass if this keeps up. I mean it.”

He lets go of my facemask and stalks back to the sideline where he and the assistant coaches start conferring, probably about what a fuckup I am.

I walk back to the huddle and see everyone looking at me like Coach just told them I have some fatal, catching disease.

Maybe I do, the way I feel right now.

Weak.

Too weak to even be angry about coach reaming me out like that in front of the entire team. About taking shit for my work ethic when the co-captain of the team, Brody, cuts out on practice entirely. Meanwhile I feel like death warmed over and I’m still here taking an ass kicking.

Luckily practice ends soon after. I change and make my way to my car.

So tired.

It’s only a ten minute drive back to my house and I’m literally falling asleep at the wheel. At one point I’m startled awake at a red light by someone frantically beeping

their horn behind me.

It's strange. Last night is so vague in my memory. Was it because Raine woke me up out of a dead sleep that I can barely recall what happened? It kind of freaks me out. I mean, even when I was hammered on a twelve pack of beer I never got blackout drunk.

Besides, I wasn't drinking last night. But I remember stumbling around the house, dizzy, talking nonsense. I remember Raine laughing at me, kissing me, the way it felt as though I couldn't breathe.

But all of it feels like it happened years ago. Snatches of conversation, a strobe-like, blinking recollection of moments that seem disconnected and fuzzy as I think back on it now.

Remembering the little bit that I do, however, is still enough to make me excited and warm all over. The way Raine smelled, her perfume, the way she looked with that sheer top that let me see...well...everything. The way her body felt pressed against mine...

I snap out of my daydream and realize I haven't even been paying attention to the road. A kid on a bike is suddenly right in front of me and I swerve to avoid him, just missing and instead running my car up the curb and into a big manicured wall of bushes in my next-door neighbors' yard.

"Jesus. Jesus Christ," I whisper, realizing how close I came to hitting that kid.

Meanwhile he's around the corner, not even seeming to notice I nearly killed him.

I back my car off the lawn and onto the street, then get out and assess the damage.

The bushes are okay, maybe a bit flattened, but part of the lawn is torn up and you

can see my tire tracks. I shake my head. Still, could've been worse.

I go up to the door and ring the bell. Mr. Nance opens the door and I explain what happened to him. He's a nice guy, very understanding and tells me it's no problem.

But I promise to come back and work on his lawn this weekend to repair the damage.

The conversation is short and he wishes me good luck for Friday night's game.

I'm going to need it, the way I'm functioning lately.

When I get home, I tell mom I'm tired from practice and head up to my room, Lying in bed, I try to think about whether there's anything to what Aiden said, whether I should actually be somehow afraid of Raine Marsden. But the truth is, I'm too tired to care.



# Chapter Five

## Natalia

My mom's home from work early, and as soon as I walk in from being with Brody, she pounces.

"Who's the boy?" She's sitting at the kitchen table, her laptop open, papers spread in front of her.

"No one," I say, shrugging. "Just a guy from school."

"He's cute."

"You didn't even see him."

"I did, I saw him through the window. Nice truck, too." She hesitates. "Just be careful."

"Mom," I say, opening the refrigerator and surveying the contents. "You don't have to worry about anything. He's just a friend." A friend. It's not a lie. Is it? I mean, me and Brody *are* friends. Although he did kiss me. We still haven't really talked about that. And I'm not sure if I'm supposed to tell him I kissed Cam or not. Cam. Ugh. I slam the refrigerator door, suddenly cranky. "There's no food in this house."

"I know," my mom says cheerfully. "I was going to go grocery shopping later.

Want to go out to dinner?"

"Thai food?" I ask hopefully. "At that place in the mall?"

An hour and a half later, I'm full of chicken pad thai and shrimp dumplings, and in a much better mood.

“Do you mind if we stop and look at some lamps at Pottery Barn?” my mom asks after she pays the bill. I wrinkle up my nose. My mom is, like, obsessed with Pottery Barn for some reason. Not that there’s anything wrong with Pottery Barn (although I prefer a more eclectic look – everything in PB looks exactly the same), it’s just that once my mom gets in there, she can never get out. Seriously, she can spend an hour deciding between two of the same lamps in different shades of tan.

“How about I’ll meet you?” I say, even though I know when I get there she’ll only be getting started. “I’m going to wander around for a bit.”

We make plans to meet up in an hour, and I head up the escalator and into ICING, my favorite cheap accessories store. I browse for a little while and then buy pair of huge silver hoops that will probably break apart in like three weeks, but are totally worth it since they’re only five bucks.

On my way out, I pass the COACH store, the beautiful bags glistening under the lights in the window. I sigh, wanting to go in, but knowing it’s pointless since I can’t actually buy anything. But then I think, why not? Browsing can still be fun. At least more fun than following my mom around Pottery Barn.

Once I’m in the store, it’s obviously apparent that I’m not going to purchase anything, since none of the salespeople approach me. Which is fine. I don’t want to have to deal with annoying salespeople. I spend a few minutes looking at the bags, all leather and cloth and smelling fresh and new. I know it’s ridiculous to spend eight hundred dollars on a purse. But they *are* gorgeous.

I’m debating whether or not it would be totally inappropriate to sling one over my shoulder and try it out, when an unmistakable voice goes echoing through the store.

“I’m looking for the poppy sequined wristlet,” Raine says. “In silver.”



“Over there,” I hear one of the salespeople say. I quickly put the bag I’m holding back onto the shelf, but it’s too late. She’s spotted me.

“Oh,” she says, “Hello, Natalia.”

Teri and Becca are behind her, of course, and they narrow their eyes at me.

Becca’s hand goes up to her face, I guess over the spot where I supposedly punched her.

I know I should just leave, go look around in the GAP, maybe buy a sweater or some new makeup to cheer myself up. But now with The Triad right in front of me, I can’t resist.

“So what’s the deal?” I ask. “You guys think you can just make things up about me? You think that’s okay? Why? Because Cam invited me to your stupid party?”

Raine sighs and looks down at the wristlets, running her fingers over the sequins on a pink one. “Oh, Natalia,” she says, “I can’t believe you’re going to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend like nothing happened.”

“Excuse me?”

“You punched me,” Becca pipes up.

“Oh, really?” I say. “Because yesterday you said I scratched you. And can you please explain to me how I got up and punched you without anyone realizing what was going on? Without anyone hearing anything?”

“I heard it,” Teri says. “You attacked her.”

“Please,” I say. I’m so angry now that I really *could* punch one of them in the face. I’d start with Raine, since she’s the worst of them, then move onto Becca, since if she’s already claiming I hurt her, I might as well actually do it.

“You know, Natalia,” Raine says, her eyes never meeting mine. She’s still looking down, only now she’s moved her attention over to a row of wallets. “You should be able to admit when you’ve done something wrong. You can’t just go around pretending it never happened, or trying to deny it. That’s how people get in a lot of trouble.” She looks up at me, then, her eyes serious and her gaze piercing.

“But I didn’t do anything,” I say, “So there’s nothing to admit.”

She gives me a thin smile, like I’m a child she’s trying to teach. “I’ll go first,” she says, “I left a note in your locker on the first day you were here, telling you to stay away from Cam. I didn’t like the fact that he invited you to my house, and I thought a note would scare you.”

Becca snorts. “Obviously not.”

“Yes,” Raine says, “Obviously not. You decided you wanted to learn your lesson the hard way.”

I gape at her. “Are you threatening me?”

“I don’t have to threaten,” Raine says.

“This is ridiculous,” I say. “I’m leaving.”

I don’t need to put up with even a second more of this. The Triad is obviously crazy, mean girls times a thousand. They’re not playing with a full deck, and I don’t have to deal with it.

I turn and walk quickly out of the store, but the three of them follow me.

“Don’t be like that, Natalia,” Raine says. “Just admit what you did.” She puts her hand on my arm, and whirls me around. Her nails dig into my skin through the sweater I’m wearing. “You hit Becca. Just tell me you punched her.”

“I didn’t punch her,” I hiss, wrenching away from her grasp.

A woman goes by, and stops and looks at us.

“Are you okay, miss?” she asks me.

“She’s fine,” Raine says, and the woman nods and keeps walking.

I push past the three of them, walking fast toward the escalator. I’m a little scared now, because for the first time, I’m starting to get the feeling that Raine is dangerous.

I step onto the escalator, and for a moment, I’m afraid the three of them are going to step on after me. I’m mentally mapping out the way to Pottery Barn, knowing that if I can just get to my mom, I’ll be safe. But when I glance over my shoulder, they’re not on the escalator. They’re standing, all of them, leaning over the railing in front of the Coach store, looking down at me.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, but it doesn’t work. My heart’s racing and my legs are jittery, and when I go to step off the escalator, my feet get tangled up underneath me. The steps keep moving, and I try again to step off, but the next thing I know, I’m falling. I catch myself with my hands, but not before my knee scrapes against the jagged edge of the bottom part of the escalator. Pain radiates through my leg.

I get up, swearing under my breath, already seeing the small bloodstain that’s

starting to seep through my pant leg. A group of teenage boys going up escalator point down at me, laughing.

Another peel of laughter comes from upstairs, and I look up. Raine, Teri, and Becca.

“See you at school tomorrow, Natalia,” Raine calls. She waves her fingers at me, and then they’re gone.



# Chapter Six

## Campbell

I wake up from a fitful sleep with half-remembered dreams and look at my clock.

It's after ten, and for a second I wonder if I slept all night, until I see the darkness through the curtains of my bedroom window.

Nope. I didn't sleep all night, just a few hours. And finally I feel a little more awake and alert.

*Is this how long it takes to recover from being around Raine?* I wonder. It's been nearly twenty-four hours. A full day.

*Don't be a jackass. You're going to listen to Aiden? He once tried to convince you that his uncle had a collection of genuine shrunken heads that he brought back from the jungles of South America. The kid is kooky.*

So now I'm having arguments with myself. I shake my head and get up out of bed, stretching. It feels good to have my wits about me, even if I am being paranoid.

Anyone would be paranoid after that stuff Aiden said.

I walk softly down the stairs to the first floor. The house is quiet. Mom must already have gone to bed.

Puttering around the kitchen, I make myself a huge turkey sandwich and then sit at the kitchen table and eat it in under two minutes.

*Maybe you should put what Aiden said to the test.*

I grab the remaining crumbs of turkey from the plate and throw them in my mouth

as I ponder this.

*Like in science class. When you have a hypothesis, you construct an experiment to test it out. That's what scientists do.*

Right now the theory is that Raine is doing something to me. Putting me under some kind of spell, whatever that means. Somehow she's making me weak.

*So I need to test it out. Go over and see her, and then pay attention to whether or not I get sick afterwards.*

After all, right now I feel pretty much one hundred percent. What better time to see if the stuff Aiden told me is real or not?

*It isn't real. It can't be real. Things like that don't happen in real life, only movies.*

I take out my cell and text Raine.

*Can I come see you tonight?*

I wait for her answer.

I'm sitting at the table staring at the phone and nothing's happening. Time is dragging on. I'm feeling antsy.

Screw it. I get up and put the phone in my pocket, put my plate in the sink, and quietly leave the house out the back door.

On my way to Raine's, I try to think of what I'm going to say to her to explain dropping by unannounced at this time of night. Her parents shouldn't be an issue seeing the way she handled them last time (*and wasn't that a little weird by the way?*), but she might be annoyed.

You can never tell how Raine's going to react to anything.

When I finally pull up to the curb near the front of her enormous house, I recognize Becca's car in the driveway.

Shit. That really puts a damper on things.

I debate just turning around and driving home. There will be other chances to test Aiden's hypothesis, it doesn't have to be right now.

But something tells me to stay.

Instead of parking right out front, I drive a little ways down the street and park under the shade of a tree that pretty much obscures my car from view. Then I get out and cut through the yard of Raine's neighbor's house, going all the way back and into the woods.

I feel like an idiot running around, hiding, like some pervert peeping tom or whatever. But I just don't want to ring the doorbell and let the Triad know I'm here.

I want to spy on them.

*But why? What can they possibly be doing?*

I don't have an answer, just a hunch. So I make my way through the trees and bushes, until eventually I catch a glimpse of the familiar Olympic sized pool and hot tub in the backyard. The yard is lit up by powerful floodlights.

I hear laughter and voices floating toward me, and so I continue moving forward, wanting to get as close as possible without being seen or heard.

I creep closer, my heartbeat starting to accelerate a little as I come to the edge of the woods that border her yard.



And now I can see the Triad clearly from my vantage point just behind a large, cropped line of shrubbery.

“...ridiculous, thinking she has a chance. The look on her face was so priceless, Raine. Seriously.”

That’s Becca talking. She laughs.

The three of them are sitting out on the fancy lounge chairs and it looks like they’re drinking wine or something.

They might even be drunk.

“It’s just the beginning,” Raine says. “She has no idea what kind of shit storm I’m going to rain down on her.”

“No pun intended,” Teri says.

“Ha. Fucking. Ha.” Raine doesn’t seem to like any kind of jokes at her expense, even harmless ones.

“I was just kidding.”

“Whatever. Natalia’s nothing. She’s a little gnat and I’ll squash her when the time is right and I feel like it.”

“Like, really squash her?”

“Not literally, idiot.”

“I know not literally, but...”

“But what?”

There’s a prolonged silence.

“Like, you know...end her?” Teri asks.

“Whatever’s easiest. I really don’t care. Now Cam on the other hand...”

The three of them laugh for some reason, like they have some kind of inside joke-

-and I get goose bumps. My flesh is crawling, it feels like a million ants are running up and down my arms.

“He’s sweet.”

“Succulent,” Becca says, giggling.

“And so much energy! I’ve never felt anything like it, I’m telling you,” Raine says, standing and pouring herself more wine. “There’s something special about him. I feel more powerful than I’ve ever felt in my life.”

“Prove it,” Becca says.

“Prove it?”

“Yeah!” Teri says, clapping. “Prove it! Show your power.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you dumbasses.”

“Scared?” Becca says.

And then suddenly one of the floodlights blows out. I can hear it shattering everywhere and half of the yard goes dark.

The girls whistle and cheer.

“Good enough?” Raine asks, her voice sounding wicked. “Or do you want more?”

But I’m already creeping backward, trying not to make any sound they can hear.

My heart is really pounding now. I can’t believe what I saw and heard.

My mind is telling me that I must have imagined it. Because people can’t do those things. They can’t make a light bulb explode with their mind.

That’s science fiction. It’s not real.

It must have been a coincidence. Had to be.

And then I’m in my car driving and at first I don’t even know where I’m going.

To Aiden’s house to tell him he was right about everything? No. Definitely not.

He couldn’t handle the truth. I’m not sure he even believed what he was telling me.

And definitely not Brody. I can’t even remotely trust that guy.

But then I realize where I have to go.

I have to warn Natalia.

**HUSHED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book Four)**

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved This book

is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons living or dead, is entirely  
coincidental



# Chapter One

## Natalia

It's after ten o'clock when there's a knock on the front door. I'm sitting in the living room with my mom, eating the remains of a frozen chocolate cake (we got home from the mall kind of late, and then we had to wait for the cake to defrost).

After the weirdness of bumping into Raine and her friends, it was comforting to spend time with my mom, watching reality shows and eating dessert. In fact, it was almost enough to make me forget about all the drama that's been going on at school. I say almost, because when the doorbell rings, my first thought is Raine.

"I'll get it," I say quickly, dropping my fork and wiping the chocolate off my face with a napkin.

"Who is it?" my mom asks, a nervous look flicking across her face, probably because she's thinking about Derek.

"I don't know," I say, rolling my eyes as I walk toward the door. "I haven't answered it yet."

I look out the dining room window, expecting to see a sliver of Raine's long blonde hair and snotty expression. But instead, it's Cam. *Cam*. My heart stops when I see him. He's wearing his baseball hat, backwards, the same way he was when we kissed. My stomach does a somersault.

"Well, who is it?" my mom asks, coming up behind me and peering over my shoulder.

But I can't talk. So she goes and opens the door. "Brody!" she says, "So nice to finally meet you! Of course, it's a little late for a visit, but ..."

Oh, Jesus. “Mom, this isn’t Brody,” I say, coming up behind her and looking at Cam. He at least has the sense to look embarrassed.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Moore,” he says, “I tried to call, but Natalia wasn’t answering her cell.”

“It’s dead,” I explain. “I was charging it up in my room.”

“Well,” my mom says, and then there’s an awkward silence that goes on a little too long until I realize my mom’s waiting for me to introduce her to Cam.

“I’m Cam,” Cam says, figuring it out a split second before I do. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “Mom, this is Cam, Cam, this is my mom.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Cam,” my mom says. “Would you like to come inside? We’re just finishing up some chocolate cake.”

Leave it to my mom to ask Cam inside at ten o’clock at night, instead of doing what any normal mother would do, which is send Cam on his way with a stern warning not to bother her daughter this late at night ever again.

“Cam can’t stay,” I say firmly. “Can you, Cam?”

“Natalia,” my mom says, giving me a weird look. “Don’t be rude. Cam’s a guest.”

“It’s okay,” he says without missing a beat. “Natalia’s right, I can’t stay. I just had a question about some homework.”

“Let me just grab my jacket,” I say, “And then I’ll walk you back to your car.” I pull my jacket off the hook by the door, hoping he gets the point about me walking him to his car. What the hell is he doing here anyway?

“Well,” my mom says, “Again, it was nice to meet you, Cam.” I can tell that she likes him already, which isn’t surprising. With his clean-cut good looks and backwards baseball hat, he looks like the All-American boy next door. And after Derek and his neck tattoo, my mom probably figures I’m safe with Cam. I wonder what she’d think if she knew he kissed me and then blew me off, if she knew he was lying about having to talk to me about homework since the only class we have together is study hall.

“You too, Mrs. Moore,” he says, giving her this really big, charming smile. Ugh.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as soon as my mom’s out of earshot.

“Are you going to come out?” he asks.

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“I’m sure your mom doesn’t want the door open, letting all the heat out.”

“The heat’s not on,” I tell him. “It’s October.”

“Oh, so it’s one of those houses,” he says, nodding like he has me all figured out.

“One of what houses?”

“The kind of houses that don’t turn their heat on until the middle of December.”

He nods. “That’s very green of you, Natalia.”

I start to shut the door on him, but he puts his hand out and stops it. “Hey, hey, hey,” he says, “Look, I’m sorry.” His face turns serious. “I really need to talk to you.”



I sigh and step out onto the porch, closing the front door behind me. I'm acting like I can't stand the fact that he's here, but inside, I'm excited. My heart is beating fast, and I can't stop looking at the curve of his lips and remembering how it felt to kiss him.

He starts walking across the lawn toward his car, and I follow him, but make sure to say, "Just so you know, I'm not going anywhere with you. So if you want to talk, talk."

He turns around. "Chill," he says, "We can sit in the car, okay? I just want some privacy."

"Fine," I say, shrugging, like the thought of being alone with him in a dark car is no big deal.

When we're inside, me settled into the passenger seat, him on the driver's side, he turns the key in the ignition, puts the heat on, and turns the radio on at a low volume. He takes a deep breath and then leans his head back against the seat. He doesn't say anything for a few moments, and so I open the door.

"Okay," I say, "Well, it was nice to see you, but — "

"No, wait." He reaches over me and pulls the door shut, and I turn around, and his face is right there and oh my God I want to kiss him. "I'm just trying to collect my thoughts."

"Yeah, well, collect them fast," I say. "Or better yet, do you want some help?"

Let me try. You never meant to hurt me, you hope we can be friends, you really like Raine, you hope I won't tell her what happened because she's a good person and blah blah blah."

"Blah blah blah?" he asks, looking confused.

“Yeah, you know, blah blah blah.”

“What does blah blah blah mean?”

“It just means... that you’ll insert some guy stuff, like doublespeak, that will just start fading into the background and become useless, and is pretty much just to make yourself feel better for acting like a shit.”

“Well, you’re wrong,” he says, “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Which part?”

“All of it.” He reaches over and takes my hand. “I really like you.”

I tear my hand away. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

I’m trying to keep the I-don’t-care façade up, but it starts to slowly crumble.

“Then why have you been ignoring me? Why didn’t you take care of things with Raine and Brody like you said you would?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you yesterday in the parking lot,” he says. “At first, I just wanted to wait to talk to you. I got to school, and you were talking Raine, and I didn’t want to screw things up if you guys were really becoming friends. I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to say anything yet. And then me and Brody made up, and he’s been my friend forever, and so I started feeling guilty. But now...now ...” He takes a deep breath, and grips the steering wheel. “I think there’s something weird going on with Raine.” He turns and looks at me, the numbers on the digital clock illuminating his face.

"I think...I think Raine might want to hurt you. Or me."

A finger of fear creeps through my stomach. "Like she wants to beat me up?"

"No, not exactly." He shakes his head. "It's like she has this... this power over people." He tells me about how his friend Aiden heard Raine and her friends messing around with red wine vinegar and calling it Camerade. He tells me how she showed up at his house the other night, how every time he leaves her, he feels sick and weak, how he thinks that's why he fainted that day at her house.

"So what does any of this have to do with me?" I ask, starting to think that maybe Cam's flipped his shit. Leave it to me to fall for the guy who's a little off. I can never just find a nice, normal guy. They all have to be bat shit crazy.

"Well, I was over there," he says, "Just now, at Raine's. I ... I parked my car, and went into the backyard. Raine was there with Becca and Teri, and they didn't know I was listening."

"And?"

"And I heard them talking about something that happened tonight, how it was just the beginning, how they were going to crush you like a gnat."

The fear moves from my stomach to my spine, giving me a chill. "Look, "I say,

"just because you were creeping around your girlfriend's house – which, by the way, is wrong on many different levels – and heard some stuck-up girls talking about how they don't like me doesn't mean they have powers."

But then I think about tonight, about running into the Triad, about how I tripped.

At the time, I just thought it was because I was so nervous and flustered. But now I wonder if it was something more.

“You haven’t noticed anything?” he asks.

“Well,” I say reluctantly, “The lights did go out at the spa yesterday. And I ran into the Triad at the mall tonight, and then I tripped on the escalator.”

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I tell him, “I’m fine.” I pull up the bottom of my jeans and show him my scraped knee.

He winces. “Did it hurt?”

“Not really.” I pull the leg of my pants back down. “Look, if they’re into some kind of craziness, like voodoo or something – ”

“Voodoo?”

“Yeah, you know, voodoo?”

“Like sticking pins into dolls and stuff?” He looks horrified.

“Yeah. Or, like, buying crystals and putting spells on people.” His face goes white.

“Oh, God,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Please, Cam, don’t tell me you believe in any of that stuff.”

“Of course not,” he says, but he’s obviously lying.

“Good, because it’s just something girls do when they’re bored. Like when you’d have sleepovers and play with your mom’s Ouija board.”

“You played with your mom’s Ouija board?”

“Well, no, my mom doesn’t have a Ouija board. I meant more ‘mom’ in the sense of the abstract.”

“I don’t know,” he says, not looking convinced. “It didn’t seem like that kind of thing. I mean, she made a light bulb shatter. With *her* eyes.”

I look at him skeptically. “Are you sure? It couldn’t have just been a trick?

Something she was doing to freak out Becca and Teri?”

“I don’t think so.” He sighs. “I just think we should be careful,” he says. And then he hesitates. “And I’m not sure, but I think Brody might have something to do with all of this, too.”

“Brody doesn’t,” I say, shaking my head. “Brody’s a good guy.”

“So good that he came to my house, threatening me and telling me I shouldn’t bring you to Raine’s party? And besides, how do you know what Brody’s like? You’ve spent, like, what, a day with him?” There’s a sharpness in his voice.

“I spent all afternoon with him, thank you very much.”

“This afternoon? Wow, you don’t waste any time.”

“Says the guy who never even broke up with his girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Does she know that?”

“Natalia...”

I’m looking out the window, and when he says my name, I turn back toward him.

It's a mistake. His eyes are pleading, and even in the darkness, I can see the look of longing on his face.

"I can't," I say, turning away as he starts to move closer to me. "I just... I can't."

He nods, like he knows. I go to open the door and as I'm getting out he says,

"Natalia, just... we have to be careful, okay?"

I nod. "Okay."

"And I don't think you should tell Brody I was here. I don't trust him."

I think about it, and after a second, I nod again. "Okay."

I slam the door shut and head up the driveway to my house, my mind swirling with the things Cam told me. Can it be true? That the Triad have some kind of powers or something? Cam told me not to trust Brody. But how do I know I can trust Cam?



# Chapter Two

## Campbell

It's the beginning of second period and it feels like forever until school gets out.

Ms. Robbins is telling us something about pi and prime numbers. Whatever it is, I'm barely listening, she's droning on and on like one of those phone voices in the Charlie Brown cartoons.

Instead, I'm thinking about Natalia. Replaying our conversation from last night.

How she said she'd spent all afternoon with Brody, and it seemed like maybe they'd even had fun together. But how is that even possible? I know Brody and he's about the furthest thing from a good conversationalist.

I mean, it should piss me off that he skated on football practice when I went even though I could barely move. But what really gets under my skin is picturing him and Natalia with each other.

Talking. Laughing. Kissing even.

I can feel my face getting red and my pulse starting to race a little. I need to take a walk or something.

I raise my hand and Ms. Robbins smiles. "Yes, Mr. Elliot? You have something to add?"

"Ah...no. Just need a bathroom pass."

Her face falls. It must be hard teaching a boring class where most of the students are either pretending to stay awake and listen or not even bothering to pretend.



She gives me the pass and I head out of the classroom. Sometimes it's fun to wander the halls, just hear the sounds of my own feet echoing through the corridors. I put my hand out and let my pass slap against the lockers as I walk by, and it makes a machine gun like sound.

It's funny, I think, how much weird crap is probably hidden in these school lockers. Candy. Magazines. Drugs. Booze. Weapons. Private notes. You could learn a lot about people if you could see into their lockers.

And then it hits me. I *can* see—or at least, I can break into—their lockers if I want. Specifically Raine's locker. Maybe there's some clue in there about what those crazy chicks are up to.

It's perfect, I realize. Nobody is around and I'm just a few feet away. I look both ways again, just to make sure.

*This is crazy. You could get in BIG trouble.*

Nobody will even notice, though, I tell myself. Most people don't even know whose locker this is, anyway. As long as Raine or the Triad doesn't show up. I'm golden.

I quickly walk to Raine's locker and put my ear against the cold, hard metal.

Then I place my right hand on the lock and slowly start to turn it. When I hear the first click, I spin it the other direction until I hear the next. And then again, until I hear the final click. BOOM.

38-27-14.

The locker opens. I check the hallway again. Nothing. Everyone's in class, hard at work. Still, I need to be fast here because if I get caught now it will probably be an automatic suspension, I might even have to miss some football games.

For a brief moment it flashes through my mind that Raine could somehow know that I've been in her locker. After all, I have no idea what her powers consist of—maybe she can sense things? Maybe she can read minds?

*What if the next time I talk to her she can tell that I've been snooping and spying on her?*

Whatever. I can't get slowed down with this kind of second-guessing. I'm here, I'm standing in front of her open locker.

There's a dark, slick coat hanging on the right hook. A purse at the bottom of the locker stuffed with all kinds of junk. I bend down and quickly rifle through it, but it's mostly makeup and hair ties and empty lipstick containers. A few tampons.

*Just what the hell do I think I'm going to find? A gun?*

I don't know. Something. A clue.

I stand up and rummage through the top cubby. Some books, a notebook.

I pull the notebook out and quickly flip through it. Mostly empty but some doodles of her name spelled with little curly cues and shit all over the place. Nothing out of the ordinary.

But just as I'm about to close the locker and walk away I notice a glimmer from the back of the cubby hole. I reach in and grab what feels like a necklace.

Just as I'm taking it out, I hear voices and footsteps that sound perilously close.

I slam the locker door and jump away, stuff my hands in my pockets and keep walking.

And around the corner comes the Triad.

Jesus. My mouth feels like someone just vacuumed all the saliva out of it. My heart's beating a million miles a minute. Did they see me? Do they know?

Raine sees me and lights up like a freaking Christmas tree. "CAM! Oh my God, we were *just* talking about you!" she yells and runs towards me.

I instinctively take a step back.

She pulls up short. "What? What's wrong with you?"

Shit. Flinching was just a reflex to seeing her unexpectedly. I didn't have time to prepare myself and now I've gone and acted like an ass. I hesitate.

My mind goes temporarily blank. My mouth opens but nothing comes out. It feels like hours have gone by without me talking.

"Um...hello?" Becca says, waving a hand in front of my face.

And then an idea comes to me. I let out a bronchial cough from deep in my chest.

Becca makes a face and steps away from me. "Ew."

"Shit, I'm sorry." I cough again into my hand. "I woke up feeling like death."

The three girls exchange glances. Teri smiles knowingly.

It makes me angry. They think I'm dying because of Raine. They're *happy* about it.

"Oh you poor, poor thing," Raine says. "What can I do?"

I shrug. "I'm okay. Just been so exhausted and run-down lately and now I'm sick. I feel like I've got pneumonia or something."

Raine laughs. "I doubt it. Probably just a cold. You need some rest."

"Yeah. Maybe. Practice has been brutal lately. I haven't been myself in days."

Again with the little smirk from Teri. I have to remind myself she's a girl and that it's better if they think I don't know what's going on. But it's tough to bite my tongue right now.

"You probably just need to replenish," Becca says, faking sympathy.

"Yeah," Teri says. "You're probably low on some important electrolytes. You should get Raine to give you some of her special sports drink." She laughs and Becca shoots her a glare.

"What sports drink?" I say.

"Nothing," Raine says. "She's being stupid as usual. She drank like three sugar-free Redbulls this morning already" She rolls her eyes. "Anyway, we should probably get going. We're all late for Chemistry now. I'm, like, failing that class. It's soooo boring."

"Okay. See you at lunch?"

"Of course." She smiles at me. "Lunch. It's a date. Feel better, Cam."

And then they're gone.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Once I'm sure they're not coming back, I dig into my front pocket and pull out the little trinket I stole from Raine's locker.

Weird.

I've never seen anything quite like it. A little sculpture of a black butterfly, and it looks like it's been carved out of onyx or marble or something. Like a fancy chess piece.

And it's attached to a silver chain. I heft it in my hand.

Something about it's mesmerizing. A black butterfly?

A chill runs up my spine. I don't like it. Something about it just seems...wrong.

But I'm probably just being paranoid. The important thing is that they didn't see me going through Raine's locker. I shove it back in my pocket and head back to math.

\*\*\*

At lunch I have to play the game. Sit with all of these people I don't even like.

Well, except for Aiden. But Aiden is kind of the low man on the totem pole and so everyone just goofs on him the whole time.

Which sucks for him. He wouldn't even be at this table if he wasn't my friend—

not that it's done him much good. Unless maybe there's satisfaction in hanging with the cool crowd even when they all treat you like dirt?

Aiden's eating a Ding Dong and chasing it with a few big gulps of milk.

Bryan Forsythe, an all-star hockey player, elbows him. "Yo, you need to wipe your mouth, son. It looks like you just ate a doo-doo sandwich."

"Shit, it does!" one of the other guys' laughs.

The girls roll their eyes.

“Whatever, it tastes good,” Aiden says, but I can tell the comment bugged him. A couple minutes later he wipes his mouth with a little green napkin his mom probably packed for him. Something about this makes me sad.

And then there’s Raine and the Triad. They sit with us and make jokes about the ugly girls and dorky kids and we all laugh. I pretend to cough.

The whole time I can’t help but be distracted because Brody’s sitting with Natalia and her friends. It should be me over there. I know she likes me. I can feel it when we’re together.

*She said she might like Brody, though.*

How can she like him? The guy is such a fake. I have a feeling he knows about Raine and her friends, too. He’s got something to do with all of this, I just feel it in my bones.

“—space cadet?” Teri says.

I only hear part of it, but suddenly everyone at the lunch table is staring at me.

“Huh?” I say.

They all laugh.

Teri shakes her head. “Told you.”

Raine rolls her eyes. “He’s just not feeling well. Right, honey?” She takes a forkful of salad and daintily puts it in her mouth and chews.

“Yeah. Not feeling good.” I fake a cough.

Aiden gives me a quizzical look. "Since when? You seemed fine this morning."

I give him a short kick in the shin under the table. "I was coughing like a madman this morning on the drive over. Remember?"

He makes a face. "Oh. Right. Yeah, yeah. I forgot. You practically hacked up a lung."

Lancaster, one of the best receivers on our team, raises his eyebrows. "Dude, you can't afford to be sick right now. Coach is gonna eat you alive if you keep slacking."

"I'm not slacking. I'm sick."

"He doesn't care if you're missing a kidney. Big game this weekend. Right?"

"I'll be up for it. Don't worry."

"I'm not the one who should be worried, dude." Lancaster pops a fry in his mouth. He's big and blond, with a head the size of a lion's, and almost no neck, like a tank. "Just sayin'."

"And I'll be good to go. Just sayin'," I tell him.

"Football's so boring," Becca says, wrinkling her nose. "What about the homecoming dance next week?"

All of the guys groan.

The homecoming dance is more than two weeks away, but it's a Santa Anna tradition that the girls ask the guys, so of course they're going to want to start talking about it already.

I peek at Natalia's table again, while pretending to stretch. I wonder if she'll be

going to the dance with Brody. The two of them are stealing little glances at each other and smiling over their bagged lunches.

Ugh. It's enough to make me genuinely sick. I fake another cough for good measure.

"So, Teri, are you going to ask Donovan or what?" Raine says.

"I don't know."

"Well if you decide against it, I can be your fallback option," Aiden says.

"Ummm...yeah...I don't think so. I'm not into twiggy emo kids."

Everyone's cracking up. Even I'm laughing, picturing the two of them together.

"I'm not an emo kid. What, just because I listen to The Spill Canvas?"

"You should never admit that in public," Lancaster says.

"I can't believe none of us have asked anyone yet," Raine says.

"Well who are you going to ask?" Becca says. "Hmmm?"

Raine shrugs. "I have my eye on someone." She glances at me. "But it needs to be just the right moment."

"Who you kidding?" Lancaster says. "You're scared."

"Oh? Of what?"

"Being rejected." He grins at her.



Raine stares back at him for a long while and the table falls silent. "Wow, Lan.

You sure have some deep insights about people, huh? You're like fucking Dr. Phil."

He winks. "Yeah, well, I'm a deep guy."

"Funny, that's not what Deena said. She told me you could only go in like three inches because that's all you have."

Lancaster shoves a few fries in his mouth. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbles.

"Boys around here are so sensitive," Raine says, tossing her hair. "I want to be entertained but no boys are entertaining me!"

"Probably just intimidated by your beauty," I say.

Raine gives me a strange look. "Not you, though, right Cam?"

Out of the corner of my eye I see Natalia laughing and Brody putting his arm over her shoulder.

I feel my anger coming back. What is she *thinking*? I already warned her about him. For all I know she's going to tell him everything.

"Not me, baby. I know what I want." I smile at her.

"It's not that easy," she says, but I can tell she's pleased.

When lunch is over, I purposely speed up on the way out of the caf so that I can bump into Natalia and Brody as they're leaving.

"Hey Cam," Brody says when he sees me. "Whaddup?"

We give each other a pound. As usual, Natalia gets quiet and stares at the ground instead of making eye contact with me.

“Nothing much,” I say easily. “How you kids doing?”

“Pretty good. Sorry about yesterday,” he says, and for a moment I think Natalia must have told him everything.

“What about it?”

“You know, Coach giving you a hard time. Wish I could have been there to tell him to lay off but—“

As if he would have. Brody would have loved seeing me get reamed out, he’s not fooling anyone.

“Yeah, what happened to you yesterday?”

He shifts his feet. “I had to visit my sister...”

“Oh.” I nod like this makes total sense, even though I know it’s a lie. He was with Natalia.

She glances up at me.

God, I want to kiss her. Get out of this dumb school and take her in my car, drive into the woods, walk around some field and have a picnic. The girl is turning me into a romantic sap.

“How’s the new school treating you, Nat?”

“Since when am I Nat?” she asks, grinning. Brody slings his arm around her

shoulders, and I resist the urge to punch him out.

“Since now.” And then before I can stop myself, I add, “Cam and Nat.”

Brody’s expression darkens. “Some active fantasy life you’ve got there, Cam. I think she prefers Natalia.”

“Oh. Do you?”

She looks at both of us and shrugs. “There are pros and cons to both.”

“I’ll bet.” I grin. “Okay, I’ll see you at practice Brody. Later, Nat!”

And as I walk out of the cafeteria, I look back and see her watching me leave with a little smile on her face.



# Chapter Three

## Natalia

“So, you’re asking Brody, right?” Adrianna asks me in chemistry lab that afternoon.

“Asking Brody what?” I’m measuring tomato paste into a beaker, so that we can extract the color and then separate it using column chromatography. At least, I think that’s what we’re doing. Science has never been my best subject.

“To homecoming,” Adrianna says, sounding exasperated. “It’s a huge thing.”

“What is?” I ask, distracted. The blood red color of the tomato paste is making me think of what Cam said yesterday. About Raine and her friends measuring out the red wine vinegar and calling it Camerade.

“Homecoming!” She throws her hands up in the air. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes. But um, I don’t know if I’m asking Brody. I haven’t thought about it.

Besides, shouldn’t *he* be asking *me*?”

“No,” Adriana says, measuring something into our graduated cylinder. “The girls ask the guys. It’s a Santa Anna tradition.”

“Isn’t that only supposed to be for Sadie Hawkins Day? And even then isn’t it lame and/or something you’d only do in the ‘60s?”

“No,” she says. “It’s cool. Everyone has to ask the guy they want, and they go all out.” Adrianna’s mixing things in different cylinders and beakers. I think she’s given up on letting me do anything because I’m so slow. God, I hate chemistry. Science is so ridiculous, all kinds of measurements and experiments that people already know the answer to. Who cares what colors a tomato has? You’d think they’d let

us do something a little more useful. To top it all off, we have to wear these ridiculous goggles and white coats, making us all look like total assholes.

“What do you mean, all out?” I ask her. The last thing I need is some new Santa Anna tradition to get involved in. The creepy girls and the hot boys I can’t seem to stay away from are enough activity for me, thank you very much.

“You know, like a big production.” She’s got everything in beaker now, and she’s waiting for it to do something (turn color?), so I pull out my binder and start to get to work on the lab report, figuring I should at least make myself useful. “Like, okay, last year Chelsey asked this guy Connor and she hired this singing Barber Shop Quartet to go to the pretzel place where he worked and sing to him.”

“That,” I say, “Sounds ridiculous.”

“No way,” she says. “It’s fun. So are you going to?”

“Going to what?”

“Ask Brody?”

“I don’t know,” I say, suddenly uncomfortable. “I’m not sure if he wants to go with me.”

“Are you kidding? He’s been sitting with you at lunch every day. I see the way he looks at you? I would kill to have a guy look at me like that.”

“How does he look at me?”

“Like he looooveeeess you,” she says, and then makes kissing noises into the air.

“Stop!” I say, giggling. “You’re going to knock over our chromatography thing.”

“Do you not want to ask him because of Cam?” Adrianna asks. She’s suddenly really busy messing around with our beaker, even though the experiment’s basically done.

“What do you mean?” I’m trying to sound innocent, but I keep my head down and my eyes focused on my paper so she can’t see my face.

“Do you like Cam? More than Brody?”

“No,” I say, not sure if I’m lying.

“Good,” she says, “Because it would be a shame if you didn’t go because of Campbell Elliott.”

“It doesn’t have to do with Cam.” But it’s not true. Of course it has to do with Cam. Lately it seems like everything has to do with Cam.

\*\*\*

After school, I don’t feel like going home, so I decide to walk to the Starbucks near school and study for a little while. I’m so behind on my history paper it’s ridiculous, and I figure I’ll be able to focus better if I’m out of the house, my ipod blasting in my ears, a cup of caffeine in front of me.

The coffee shop is only a few blocks from school, but it’s gotten cold out, and so I wrap my scarf around my neck and shove my hands in the pockets of my coat. As I do, my phone vibrates with a text, and I pull it out. For some reason, I hope it’s Cam, even though I know that’s silly.

*“Hey N – it’s Derek – just wanted to say sorry for showing up at ur school – I’m ready to talk when you r”*

My heart skips a beat, and I stop walking. I look around, but I’m on a main road,

thank God, and there's no one around. I pull my gloves off and text him back, my fingers angrily pushing against the keys. *"How did u get this number?"*

"Natalia?" a voice says behind me, and I scream and drop my phone.

"Jesus," Cam says, picking up my cell and handing it to me. "What's with you?"

"What's with me?" I say, grabbing my phone. "I don't know, Cam. My ex-boyfriend might be stalking me, and you told me that Raine wants to put a spell on me or kill me or hurt me or something. So I'm sure you won't blame me if I'm a little jumpy."

"Okay, okay," he says, holding his hands up in surrender. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," I say, feeling bad for going off on him. I shove my phone back in my pocket. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

He looks around, then says, "Come here." He grabs the sleeve of my jacket and leads me back into the trees that line the street. We're still on the main road, but it's kind of creepy. I mean, how much do I really know about Cam? Yes, we kissed. Yes, he's hot. Yes, every time I see him I want to pull him close to me. But I have horrible taste when it comes to guys. He could be pulling me back here for any number of reasons.

"Where are we going?" I ask as our feet crunch through the leaves.

"Just a little ways back," he says, "I don't want anyone from school seeing us."

"Wow, Cam," I say, attempting to joke around. "If you wanted to get me alone, this is a pretty elaborate scheme." But he doesn't laugh, and then, I get nervous.

"Okay," he says once we're safely out of view from the street. "I have to show you



something.” He pulls something out from his pocket. A necklace. He hands it to me.

“A necklace?” For a second, I think he’s giving it to me, and my heart speeds up.

“I found it in Raine’s locker.”

“You broke into Raine’s locker? Isn’t that a little reckless?”

“Save it.”

“Fine.” I shrug. “You broke into Raine’s locker and found a necklace. So?”

“So? Don’t you think it looks a little creepy?” I sigh. If a weird-looking necklace is his big smoking gun, he’s definitely gone off the deep end with this whole witch thing. Still, I take a closer look, mostly to humor him. It’s a butterfly. Black, which *is* kind of strange. It’s carved out of some kind of shiny stone, and on a silver chain. The delicateness of the chain is in sharp contrast to the boldness of the butterfly, and makes it look more dramatic.

“It *is* a little weird-looking,” I say. “But just because she--” And then I stop.

Because I’m remembering. The butterfly I saw that was dancing in front of Raine’s face at the spa. At the time I thought it was just part of my panic attack, but now... I look closer at the stone. It looks exactly like the one I saw.

“What?” Cam asks. “What is it?”

“It’s just... that day at the spa, when they said I attacked Becca. When all of that was going on, it .. I saw a black butterfly in front of Raine’s face. At the time I thought it was just...”

“Just what?”

“A trick of the light. But it looks exactly like this one.” I reach out and run my fingers over the carving of the wings, and I shiver.

“I had a dream,” Cam says, “about butterflies. You were in a field, and there were all these butterflies. I was trying to find you, I was trying to save you, but I couldn’t.”

“I saw a butterfly the day you fainted,” I remember. “At Raine’s house. It wasn’t black, but its wings looked funny, like it was getting darker.”

“Jesus,” Cam says. “Any other times?”

I think about it, not sure I really want to tell him about the one other time I can remembering seeing butterfly. But finally I sigh and say, “My first day at Santa Anna.

When Brody came to my house. I remember thinking it was weird because it was starting to get cold out. That was the first time.”

Cam has a sharp intake of breath, and he looks at me, with an I-told-you-so look.

But weird butterflies or not, I still can’t believe that Brody has anything to do with this.

“This is fucked up,” Cam says. He takes off his baseball hat, runs his fingers through his hair, then puts it back on his head.

“It doesn’t mean anything.” I say. “Just because you had a dream?” I hold the necklace back out to him, wanting him to take it back. Something about having it in my hand is making me nervous.

“And because you keep seeing them every time something creepy happens?”

“Not every time.”

He looks at me skeptically. “Okay, fine,” I say, “What do you want from me?”

“I don’t know.” His face looks so serious and worried, that I feel like I need to say something to make him feel better.

“Look,” I say, “This is nothing to freak out about. I told you, girls mess with this stuff all the time. I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.”

“You’re sure?”

I think about it. “No,” I say finally, “Are *you* sure it *is* something?”

“No.” He looks up at me, and I look at him, and we don’t say anything for a second, and then finally, Cam takes a step closer to me. “I want to kiss you really bad right now,” he says.

“We tried that, remember? It didn’t work out so well.” I look away, not able to take the heat that’s bouncing between our bodies.

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“Look,” I say, shaking my head, and deciding to avoid the question. I cross my arms over my chest to put up more of a barrier between us. “What are we going to do? If they are doing some kind of weird witchcraft -- and I’m not saying they are, but *if* they are -- then what do we do? Find some kind of spell to counteract it or something?”

“I don’t know.” He sighs. “Let me think about it and see if I can find out anything else. I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

“Okay.” My heart speeds up even more at the thought of talking to him later, and I

wish I'd kissed him when he told me he wanted to.

"And until then, we have to be careful. I don't want Raine or Brody to know that we talked, okay?"

"I hate the thought of lying to Brody," I tell him.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure you'll be able to deal with it." His tone is harsh. "I'll call you tonight," he says. "Go ahead and keep walking. I'll wait a few minutes until you're gone, and then I'll go, okay?"

I nod and turn, starting to walk back toward the sidewalk.

"Natalia?" he calls after me.

"Yeah?" I say, turning around.

"I still want to kiss you really bad."

I turn back around before he can see the grin on my face.



# Chapter Four

## Campbell

After seeing Natalia, I head back to school and get dressed for practice. As usual, seeing her has me all revved up, like I just took ten caffeine pills. I keep picturing her face, the way she smiled at me right as we were leaving each other.

I feel like I could run all day and night the way I feel.

Because of all this extra energy, I'm finally having a good practice, and even Coach has to admit it.

"Looking good, Elliot," he calls from the sideline after I strip the ball from Lancaster on the five-yard line at the end of our team scrimmage.

Lancaster shakes his head and rips off his chinstrap. "That was helmet to helmet, dude," he says, moving towards me.

"Head to head?" I laugh. "More like you've got your head in your ass."

"What the fuck did you say?" He shoves me and I shove him back.

"Maybe from now on, at lunch, you'll keep your little comments about my performance to yourself, *dude*," I say, turning around and walking away from him.

I look at Coach and he's grinning from ear to ear. They like to see us all riled up before a big game. And I have to admit, I kind of like it, too. Ultimately, it's pretty harmless, and it's been a long time—since before Raine's party—since I felt this strong and energized.

Brody gives me a pound as I come off the field.

He's holding his helmet by the facemask, his hair is all mussed and he's sweating.

I wish Natalia could see this smelly, stinky idiot that she thinks is such a cool guy.  
"You trying to wind Lancaster up or what?" he chuckles.

"Nah. He just has a big mouth and sometimes he needs to be taken down a peg or two."

"Sure, I hear that." He spits.

Charming.

"So...how are things going with you and Natalia?" I ask him. "You two seem pretty close lately."

Brody looks at me as if trying to figure out what I'm after. "I don't know. She's a really cool chick. We're just...you know...hanging out. Seeing where it goes."

"And what about how you called her a skank and told me not to see her?"

"What is this? A fucking interrogation, Elliot?"

"Just doesn't make sense now that you're like Jack and Jill, close as two peas in a pod."

"Hey, everyone makes mistakes. Turns out I was wrong about her."

"Oh." I nod my head. Smile. "Cool. Well, I'm happy for you then."

"Cam, I thought we squashed that whole thing already."

"We did. We did. I was just making conversation. No worries."

His brow is wrinkled. “Look, I hope you would never tell her I said that stuff.

She’s a nice girl. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“And I’m a nice guy. So don’t sweat it.”

\*\*\*

When I get home, I can barely sit still.

I take a shower, change, listen to some music in my room. I pull out Raine’s necklace and examine it under my desk lamp. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

Even after sitting under the heat from the 125 watt bulb it feels cool in my hands.

Maybe Aiden would know what it’s made out of. He’s a smart kid.

I go to my window and look outside. From the right angle I can see his driveway.

When we were kids we used to do hand signals to communicate from far away.

He’d stand at the edge of his driveway and ask me to come out and play by doing a series of ridiculous movements.

Like our secret code.

Picturing that makes me break into a smile.

Until I see the car in his driveway. It’s a silver Cabriolet. I’d recognize it anywhere. Becca’s car.

“What the hell is she *doing*?” I say out loud. Great. Now I’m talking to myself like a



crazy person.

I throw on my varsity jacket and sneakers and walk the short distance to Aiden's house. I'm pretty sure it's not the smartest move to just show up like this, but I have to make sure he's okay.

I walk up the front steps and ring the doorbell. It's one of those annoying kinds that plays a whole song when you press it. I should have just knocked.

After a couple of minutes Aiden answers the door. He looks kind of drunk, smiling, his eyes half-lidded. "Yo, Cam!" He turns. "Hey, it's Campbell!"

"Oh?" I hear Becca's distinctive, bitchy voice pipe up from nearby. But I can't see her.

Aiden turns back to me. His voice lowers. "I'm kind of in the middle of something..." He winks, but it looks more like both eyes squinting.

"That's cool. I'll just be a minute." I elbow in past him. Something's rotten about this whole scenario.

I mean, come on. Becca coming to Aiden's house for a visit? She wouldn't normally be caught dead within five feet of the kid.

As I come inside, I spot her standing on the stairs that lead to the basement. She's wearing a total hoochie mamma outfit. Skirt, boots, and a tank top that shows plenty of boobage. Her blond hair is all done up and I can smell the perfume from a mile away.

She might as well have written "I'M UP FOR IT" on her forehead in bright red letters.

"Hi Cam," she says, all giggling. "Fancy seeing you here."

“Well, I’m Aiden’s friend so I come by all the time. What’s your reason?”

She shrugs. “Aiden needed a ride home.”

“And what about the little outfit change?” I ask.

Aiden starts down the stairs to the basement, talking as he goes. “Yeah, that’s a funny story. When she dropped me off, she noticed my folks weren’t home so Becca asked to come in. One thing led to another and we broke into the liquor cabinet.” He laughs and so does Becca.

“I got a wee bit tipsy,” she says, “And I told Aiden I wanted to do a fashion show for him. It’s a little embarrassing.”

I go downstairs to the rec room where there’s a pool table, flat screen TV and video game system. It’s a nice hangout spot. There’s a bunch of booze on the table and her purse and a couple plastic bags are nearby.

“You always carry around so many changes of clothes?” I say, surveying the room.

“You know girls,” she says. “We love to try on new outfits.”

Music is playing softly through the surround sound speakers.

“Looks like you kids were having a blast,” I say.

Aiden laughs. He stumbles and finally falls onto the couch, laughing some more.

“Whoa, I am drunkety drunk drunk.”

“You’ll sober up in a few.” Becca starts gathering her stuff.

“What? You leaving already?” he says.

She steals a glance at me. “Yeah. It’s getting late and I don’t want to get you in any trouble.”

“No, I’m sure you don’t,” I say.

She smiles. “It was good seeing you Cam. I’ll tell Raine—“

“—that I said hi. Definitely.” I flash her a fake smile back and she gets a weird look on her face.

I should be acting nicer but it pisses me off that she’s here, messing with Aiden.

He’s too good for her. For any of them. And I know she doesn’t care about him at all.

In fact, she’s probably just scrounging for info about me.

“Bye, Aiden,” she says and blows him a kiss.

He catches it while lying on the couch. “Bye Bec-Bec!” He shouts as the door slams closed.

A moment later we hear the car engine start and then she’s gone.

I fold my arms and look at him. He’s grinning broadly and a little dribble of saliva is trickling down his chin. “Dude, what the hell is going on?”

He sits up, but he doesn’t look too steady. “What do you mean?”

“What the hell did she do to you?”

He shrugs. “Why did you make her leave, Cam? I was about to...”

“What? You think you can get a girl like that?”

His smile fades. “Why not?”

I walk closer and sit down next to him on the couch. He smells of alcohol and perfume and...something else. Like dirt or moldy fruit or something.

“Aiden, listen to me. Listen.” I put my hand on his shoulder and he pulls away.

“I don’t need a lecture right now. You went and screwed it all up. I was about to—”

“You think she was going to bang you?”

He looks at me with unfocused eyes, his brown pupils as big and round as buttons on a suit jacket. “She kissed me. Tongue and everything. Let me grab her boobs. She even touched my Jack Johnson if you want the whole truth.”

The look on my face must say it all. “And why do you think that happened? You think it’s coincidence, Aid?”

He snorts. “No, I think maybe for once a girl noticed that I’m actually a pretty cool guy. I’m funny. I’m smart. I’m not totally hideous.”

“She said all that?”

“Maybe. So what?”

“So, has that girl ever so much as *looked* in your direction before today?”

“You’re just jealous, Cam.” His face looks pale and waxy. I’ve seen that look before, I think—on myself. In the mirror, the day after Raine’s party. Like someone

had sucked all the life out of me.

“Jealous. Okay...I’m jealous...of...”

He stands up. “You like me being some loser, some scrub that sits around and waits for you to be ready to hang out. If I get a girlfriend and a life, where would that leave you? You need my life to be shitty so that you always have me on-call for when you’re bored or have nothing better to do.”

“That’s total bullshit,” I say, but I have to admit, the comment stings. I wonder if maybe he’s right. Do I use Aiden for when I have nothing better to do, as someone to make me feel better about myself?

“It’s not bullshit,” he says. “What’s bullshit is that you always find a way to make me feel worse about myself. Finally a cute girl takes an interest and you have to come over and ruin everything.”

“Look, I need to tell you something,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Save it.”

“Remember how you told me the girls made those comments in cooking class about me? The ‘Camerade’ and all that stuff?”

Aiden keeps shaking his head. “They were just teasing. Becca explained it to me today—”

I stand up. “Wait. You *told* her about that? Does she know that you told me?”

Aiden keeps talking as if I haven’t said a word. “Becca said that they all think it’s like this connection you and Raine have. You two are so hot for each other that it, like, makes you weak in the knees and stuff. So they all joke and tease Raine about it.”

“So joking about her drinking my blood for energy—”

“You’ve got it all wrong, man. You really think they’re doing some kind of magic on you?” Aiden says. He throws his head back and laughs maniacally. “You must have a screw loose.”

I throw my hands up. “You’re obviously not in the right mental state to listen to reason. We’ll talk tomorrow on the way to school when you’ve had a chance to get your head together and sober up.”

Aiden chuckles. “Actually, you can save a penny in gas and skip my house.

Becca’s giving me a ride.”

“Oh, so it’s like that, huh?”

“And she’s asked me to the Homecoming Dance. I said yes.”

I just stare at him, totally stunned. I can’t believe he’s buying into this ridiculousness. But then I realize that he’s either under Becca’s spell, or he’s so desperate for attention that he refuses to see the truth. Maybe both.

“Look, Aiden. I’m your best friend.”

“You *were* my best friend.” He yawns. “But for the last five years you’ve treated me like your kid brother, and you make me feel like shit about myself. I think maybe we need a break.”

I lick my lips, think of trying to tell him what I saw when I spied on Raine and Becca and Teri last night. But I know it’s a waste of time.

When I get home from Aiden's, I call Natalia.

"Hello?"

Her voice instantly calms me. I sigh. "Hey, it's Cam."

"You okay?"

"Not really." I tell her what happened when I went to Aiden's house.

"You think they're doing something to him?" she asks.

"I don't know. I mean, there has to be an explanation besides the idea that Becca suddenly thinks Aiden is the new Channing Tatum."

"I mean, is it possible she really does like him?"

"Natalia. Come on."

"Okay, you're right. I mean, Aiden's cute and all but he's definitely not Becca's type."

"They're planning something, Nat. I know it."

"Cam..."

"Yeah?"

"I like it when you call me Nat."

"Hey, we've got serious shit to deal with, right now," I say, but I'm smiling.

“I know, I know.” She sighs. “I just kind of hate that we have to be secretive about our friendship.”

I lie back on my bed and stare at the ceiling. “Is that what we are? Friends?”

“Look, Cam...”

“Don’t say it. Just. Don’t.”

“It’s confusing, but I mean—maybe we should talk about it.”

“Talk about what? You like Brody. And so me and you are just friends now.

Right?”

“You and I *can’t* be anything more than friends. We’re keeping secrets from people now. We’re not being honest with anyone.”

“That’s not my fault. We’re dealing with a bunch of psycho witches that have some kind of powers and want to kill us.”

“Wanting to kill us is kind of a stretch,” she says. “And we need to make sure we’re not just letting our imaginations run wild with all this stuff.”

“Well, I know I didn’t imagine that black butterfly necklace I found.”

“The necklace doesn’t prove anything.”

“I know. I know. But something’s off. Something’s wrong with this whole picture. I mean, Aiden and Becca an item? Hell must be freezing over.”

She laughs. I smile again despite myself. “Wouldn’t it be cool if me and you went to the dance together? I mean, that could be fun, right?”



There's a long silence. "Yes. That could be a lot of fun."

I sigh. Turns out there might actually be a more impossible couple than Becca and Aiden. And that's me and Natalia.

\*\*\*

The next morning I drive to school alone. All these thoughts are spinning in my head. Me and Natalia. Raine. Brody. Becca and Aiden. Natalia's crazy ex-boyfriend.

The homecoming dance. The big football game on Friday.

I wish I had just one answer for any of the questions floating around my brain, but I don't.

When I get to our hallway, the first thing I see is Becca and Aiden together. She's leaning over, whispering in his ear. His face looks like an albino's. Totally white and drained of color. But he's smiling at whatever she's saying.

God, he's totally shot.

And then I'm opening my locker and for a second I think maybe I'm just having a super realistic dream, because all these little black butterflies come floating and falling out of my locker. Hundreds of them. I almost scream but then I realize they're just pieces of paper.

But still. They look real.

Black butterflies. I grit my teeth and make an effort not to run away from them as they float down and gather around my feet like dead things.

Around me, I hear people gasp and ooh and awe.

They continue to spill out of the locker and onto the floor.

And I know. Something bad is coming....

## **PURSUED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book Five)**

**by Lauren Barnholdt & Aaron Gorvine**

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental



# Chapter One

## Natalia

I'm walking into school the next morning when I see all these black butterflies come fluttering out of Cam's locker. They're papery and sparkly and everyone in the junior hall stops to look.

I start to take a step toward him, but before I can, Brody comes up behind me.

"Hey," he says easily. "Where've you been?" He's wearing his varsity jacket and his hair is still wet from the shower.

"I'm right here," I say. I'm trying to sound friendly, but I'm also a little annoyed.

I can't think of anything except getting to Cam.

"You never texted me back last night," Brody says.

"Sorry." I'm distracted, still watching Cam, because those butterflies are creepy.

He bends down and picks one up, turning it over in his hand.

Brody follows my gaze. "Ahh," he says, "So Raine's asking Cam to homecoming, huh?"

At that moment, Raine comes walking down the hall, dressed all in black. Black short tiered skirt, black tights, tight black shirt, and high black stilettos. She put her hands over Cam's eyes and when he turns around, she picks up the biggest paper butterfly that's lying on the floor. She unfolds it, and lets Cam read the white sparkly letters that probably say, "Cam, will you go to homecoming with me?"

Cam smiles, wrapping his arms around her. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he

really did want to go to homecoming with Raine.

“I always thought that stuff was lame,” Brody says, watching them. “Why does everyone have to go all out just to ask someone to a stupid dance? It’s insane.”

“I don’t know,” I say, my mouth dry. I lick my lips, trying not to let Brody see how rattled I am by all those butterflies. This is getting really weird, and a strong feeling of trepidation that I’ve never felt before settles into my stomach. It makes me almost certain that something really, really bad is about to happen.

“And furthermore,” Brody says, “Why do the girls have to ask the guys? Call me old-fashioned, but I think the guy should always do the asking.”

I’m still looking across the hall to where Raine has now wrapped her arms around Cam, and he’s pulling her closer. My eyes lock on his, but I look away quickly before Brody or Raine can catch us staring at each other. I hate that Cam’s with Raine. And a lot of it doesn’t even have to do with the creepy stuff she’s doing. Witch or not, it doesn’t change the fact that the guy I like has his arms around someone else.

“Hello!” Brody’s saying, “Earth to Natalia!”

“Sorry,” I say, shaking my head and trying to snap out of it. I turn my back on Raine and Cam, and give Brody a smile. “I’m listening.”

“You’re listening?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?” He leans against my locker, and gives me a teasing grin. He really is hot. I search his face for any signs of evilness, something in his eyes that would lead me to believe he has anything to do with the craziness that’s going on. But there’s nothing.

“Positive.”

“Then are you going to tell me why you never texted me back last night?”

Something tells me that the truth – I was so wiped out after my conversation with Cam in the woods and my creepy text from Derek that I ended up just falling asleep after Cam called me – isn’t going to cut it. So instead I just say, “Sorry, I fell asleep super early last night.”

We start to walk toward my homeroom, and Brody takes my books out of my hands. For the first time, I start to wonder if this whole being-a-gentlemen thing he’s got going on is just an act.

“So do you want to go to the dance with me?” Brody asks, as we navigate through the bodies around us. The junior hall, which was quiet just a second ago as everyone watched the spectacle Raine and Cam were putting on, is now alive with activity and laughter, everyone rushing to get where they need to go before the bell rings.

“With you?”

“Yeah, with me,” he says. “Hence the question ‘do you want to go to the dance with me?’ Unless...oh, I’m sorry, Natalia, did you have some kind of elaborate plan to ask me?”

“What if I did?” I ask, deciding to tease him right back.

“Then you can still go through with it,” he says, “In fact, I think you should. I’d love it. Something really big, that everyone would be talking about the next day.”

“That’s okay,” I say, doing a big fake sigh. “I’ll just have to save it for next time.

Call off the singing barbershop quartet.”

“Natalia,” he says, pretending to be exasperated with me. “Are you trying to rip off someone else’s idea? Chelsey Simmons did that last year.”

“Caught,” I say, snapping my fingers. “Damn. And I was so looking forward to it, too.”

“I’m sure you were.” We’re at my homeroom now, and I reach out, taking my books from him. “So you do want to go?” he asks. Suddenly, he looks nervous, like he’s not sure I’m going to say yes. I hesitate, remembering what Cam said about not trusting Brody. But I’m not convinced Brody has anything to do with this. And even if he does, what am I supposed to do? Avoiding him is just going to be weird. Besides, if Cam is going to the dance with Raine, then I have the right to go with Brody.

“Of course,” I say, smiling. “Of course I want to go to the dance with you.” And as I’m saying the words, I realize they’re true.

\*\*\*

After school, Adrianna and I go shopping for dresses to wear to homecoming. I invited her to go at lunch, mostly because I like Adrianna, and also because I just wanted to do something normal for a change. Cam’s been weird all day, ignoring me in study hall and in the halls. And even though I know he said it’s not a good idea for anyone to see us together, I just... I don’t know. I guess I’m more upset about it than I should be.

“What about this one?” Adrianna asks, pulling a floor-length mermaid style dress off the rack and holding it up.

“That looks like a prom dress,” I say, making a face and flipping through a bunch of simple black dresses, looking for my size.

“Well, you can’t find anything you like!” she says. “We’ve looked at everything.”

“Not everything,” I say, gesturing to the three dresses that are in my arms. “I’m going to try these on. And besides, you can’t talk. Not unless you want to try something on.”

“I want to,” she says, wistfully, running her hand over the top of a lilac colored gown. “But first I need a date. Then I’ll get a dress.”

Adrianna wants to ask this guy Lancaster to the dance, but she’s afraid that if she buys a dress before she asks him, she’ll jinx it. And after everything that’s going on with Raine and her crazy voodoo stuff, who am I to say that’s wrong? Besides, Adrianna was nice enough to come shopping with me even though she wasn’t even planning on buying anything.

I head into the dressing room, and exchange my school clothes for a gorgeous, deep crimson dress with thin shimmery threads running through bodice. The skirt is flared and short, and the top has thin straps, but the color makes the dress seem more fall than summer.

“This is it!” I say, throwing open the door to the dressing room.

“Oh, Natalia,” Adrianna says, clapping her hands. “You look amazing.”

“You think?”

“Brody’s going to love it.”

“I’m not even going to bother trying on the other two.” I also don’t bother to tell her that I’m a little more interested in Cam liking the dress than Brody. I change back into my clothes, and Adrianna and I joke around while we wait in line at the cash register, painting our pinkies with the testers from a display of nail polish. It’s been



a while since I've had some good old-fashioned girl bonding time with someone other than my mom, and I'm having a great time.

"Should we grab a coffee or something?" I ask on our way out of the store.

"Definitely," Adrianna says, "And then do you want to head to the party store?"

"Does this mean you're going to ask him?" I ask, glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. Not only is Adrianna not buying a dress until she asks Lancaster, she still doesn't even know if she has the courage to ask him in the first place. They're kind of in different social circles, but from what Adrianna says, they got to know each other a little bit when they got paired up on a social studies project at the beginning of the year.

"I don't know," she says, tucking her hand behind her ear. "But there's no harm in trying to get ideas for how I would ask him. You know, just in case." She bites her lip. "Right?"

"Right," I say, "And don't worry, I'll help you. It'll be fun."

But when we get to the coffee place, there's a huge line that snakes out the door and into the mall. I can tell Adrianna's getting kind of antsy, probably because she's anxious to get to the party store and start trying to figure out a cute way to ask Lancaster to the dance. "Why don't you go ahead," I say, "And I'll get the coffees and meet you down there."

"You sure?"

"Of course."

She looks at me gratefully, asks me to order her a mocha latte, and then she's gone. I stand in line, inhaling the scents of coffee and the freshly baked pastries, and enjoying the fact that I'm here, at the mall, shopping with a new friend.

My phone vibrates with a text, and I pull it out of my purse. Brody.

“Find something good?”

I text him back.

“I think so.”

“What color?”

“Red”

“Hot! Cant wait to c it”

“Something funny?” a familiar voice asks, and I turn around, the smile immediately dropping from my face. Derek. He’s standing there, hands in his pockets, a bored expression on his face. I do what my first instinct tells me to. And that’s run. But as I turn and start to flee, he grabs my arm.

“Don’t touch me,” I say, wrenching free. A couple of people turn to look, and I’m reminded of the other night, when Raine and I got into it outside of the Coach store.

“Okay, okay,” he says, holding his arms up. “Chill. I just want to talk.”

“You keep saying that.” I cross my arms over my chest, waiting. “So if you want to talk, talk.”

He sighs. “I want to say I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry.” He looks over at one of the tables in front of the coffee shop, and says softly, “Can we sit?”

I think about it. Every fiber in my being is telling me to get away from him, but I know if I run, he’s just going to keep bothering me. “If I talk to you, then will you leave me alone?”

“Yes,” he says, and then, seeing the skeptical look on my face, he adds, “I promise.”

“Not that your promises mean anything,” I mumble, following him over to one of the little wrought iron tables in front of the coffee shop.

“So how are you?” he asks once we’re sitting.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “No small talk. Say what you need to say.”

“Fine. I’m sorry for how things ended,” he says, “And I’m sorry for what I did.

I never meant to hurt you.”

“So you’re admitting that you made up all those rumors about me?” When everything went down at my old school, and all the rumors started up, Derek denied that he’d told everyone we had sex, or all the other disgusting things he said we did. Even when the girls at my school started calling me a slut and a whore, even when my friends turned on me, he still denied it. So to hear him maybe admit it for the first time is surprising.

“Yes,” he says. He shifts on his chair. “And I’m sorry.”

“Apology not accepted.” I feel like crying, but if Derek thinks I’m going to break down and have some kind of meltdown in the mall, he’s wrong. I’ve always had my meltdowns about him and what went on at my old school in private, and that’s not

going to change now. “Is that all?” I ask, standing up.

“No.”

“Then what else?”

“That guy you were with the other day? Is that your boyfriend?”

“What guy?”

“The one in the parking lot?”

“No,” I say, “He’s not my boyfriend. Not that it would be any of your business if he was.”

“Really?” He shakes his head and leans back in his chair, hooking his arm across the back. “Because he seemed like he really cared about you. Much more than that other tool.”

It takes me a second to realize who he’s talking about. Brody. Last weekend when we all went to brunch. “Yeah, well, now that you’ve given your opinion on my love life, I guess I’ll be going.”

I sling my bag over my shoulder and look back toward the coffee shop.

“Thanks for talking to me, Natalia,” he says. “I’m not going to bother you anymore.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I’ll believe that when I see it.” I turn around to go, and for a second, I think I feel him grab my bag to pull me back toward him. But when I turn around, all I see is his back, walking away from me and down the hall.

\*\*\*

Adrianna and I spend an hour in the party store, and when we leave, we're nowhere close to coming up with a good way for her to ask Lancaster to homecoming. I do my best to forget about what just went down with Derek, and try to have fun messing around with the noisemakers, trying on the boas and tiaras, and picking out the invitations we'd want for our weddings.

When I get home, I hang my new dress in the closet, letting my hand slide down the front of the skirt. It really is gorgeous, and I'm kind of looking forward to being at the dance with Brody.

My mom's at work, so I order pizza and while I'm waiting for it to come, change into my comfiest pajama pants, a tank top and my gray hoodie. I'm just settling in with my math book and a DVR'd episode of Glee when Cam calls.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi." His voice makes my heart catch.

"What are you doing?"

I wonder if telling him what I'm actually doing would make him think I'm a freak, but then decide I really have nothing to lose. "Honestly? I'm watching Glee and waiting for my pizza to get here."

The doorbell rings.

"Sounds like it's there," Cam says.

"That was fast," I say, getting up off the couch. "Every time I order from this place they never –"

I open the door, and Cam is standing on my doorstep.

“Hi,” he says, the side of his mouth turning up into a grin.

“What are you doing here?” I say, shutting my cell phone off.

“I came to see you. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” I move aside and he steps inside. And then, before I even know what’s happening, he turns to me, pulls me to him, and kisses me.

This time, I let myself go. I don’t stop him. I lean in, and his lips feel amazing and right. The kiss is perfect. And when I finally pull away, I have to catch my breath.

“Hi,” he says again, his forehead against mine.

“Hi,” I say, still a little breathless. We stay like that for a few seconds, my heart pounding so loud I’m afraid he’s going to be able to hear it.

The doorbell rings again, and this time it really is the pizza, so I pull myself away from Cam to answer it. He grabs some paper plates and cans of sodas from the kitchen, and we bring the box into the living room and settle in on the couch.

He opens up the pizza and slides a slice onto a paper plate. “Pepperoni and sausage,” he says, holding it out to me and nodding in approval. “Very nice.”

“It’s my favorite.” I take the plate from him, inhaling the scent of cheese and Italian spices.

“I find most girls are afraid of sausage.”

“Not me.” I take a sip of my soda. “So what’s up?” I ask. “Are you okay? After this morning, with the black butterflies...That was...”

“I know,” Cam says, suddenly serious. “It was creepy, right?” He puts two slices of

pizza on his plate.

“Have you talked to Aiden since yesterday?” I ask.

“No.” He shrugs. “I’m not sure what to do. I don’t know how much he told Becca, or how much they’re onto me.”

“Onto us.”

“I like when you call us an us,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. He moves closer to me on the couch.

I look away, suddenly uncomfortable. Yes, that kiss was amazing. But honestly, the only reason it happened was because it took me by surprise and I lost my self-control.

I can’t be kissing Cam. Can I? This whole secret relationship thing is confusing, especially since I’m supposed to be going to the dance with Brody.

“Did you ask Brody to the dance?” Cam asks, like he’s reading my mind.

“He asked me.”

“Are you going?”

“Are you going with Raine?”

“You know I am.”

“This is getting complicated,” I say.

“Yeah.” He puts his pizza down and looks at me seriously. “At least we’re in it together.”

I grin. "I like when you call us a 'we.'"

We spend the next couple of hours eating pizza, watching Glee (Cam's never seen it, and even though he's trying to make fun of it, I think he secretly likes it.) When I walk him to the door, it's a little before eleven.

"When will I see you again?" he asks, stepping out onto the porch.

"Tomorrow at school."

"That's not what I meant."

I hesitate. "I thought people weren't supposed to see us together?"

"Who's going to see us at your house this late? Besides, I parked two streets over."

"You're so covert," I say. He takes a step back toward me, and when he kisses me this time, I let myself go even more than before, and when we pull away, for a second I almost let myself believe that we could be together.

I watch him out the window, loping across my front lawn and down the street.

When he's gone, I settle down at the kitchen table. I have at least an hour of math homework left before I can go to sleep.

As I pull my book out of my bag, a small, gift wrapped box falls onto the floor. I bend down and pick it up, running my hand over the white ribbon. What the --- ? Did Cam leave me a present? No, I think, I was with him the whole time. Brody? It could be.

And then the answer hits me like a shot. Derek. When I thought he grabbed my



bag, he must have slipped it in there.

For a second, I debate just throwing it away. But instead, I slip my finger under the ribbon and pull open the box, halfway expecting it to explode or shoot water at me or something.

But it's just a piece of jewelry. A necklace, with a delicate silver chain. I pull it out of the box, trying to get a better look at the charm on the end of it. And when I do, my blood runs cold. It's a stone, carved into the shape of a white butterfly.



# Chapter Two

## Campbell

Not five minutes after I leave her house, Natalia's calling me.

"Miss me already?" I ask when I answer.

But then I hear her voice, and I know something's really wrong. She starts to tell me about a weird butterfly charm that she found in her bag and maybe it's Derek and how would he know Raine and she can barely keep her thoughts straight.

"I'm coming back," I tell her before she even finishes.

"Cam, no. I'm just...I'm probably just being a baby," she says.

"I don't care. I'm coming." I swing the car around in a u-turn as I say the words.

"Give me two minutes."

I hang up the phone and try to calm my own fraying nerves. Ever since Natalia came to school it's been a rollercoaster ride. Up and down, up and down. Just a little while ago I was on cloud nine, being with Nat, holding her, kissing her.

But then something weird always has to happen. It's not her fault, I know that.

But I don't understand why it has to be so hard.

I park the car in front of her house and she's already waiting for me, sitting on the front steps, looking cute and a little lost.

"Be honest, you planted this butterfly necklace or whatever it is, just so you could see me again tonight," I say, as I walk toward her.

She's got her arms wrapped around her legs and chin on her knees, kind of like a little kid would do. It's pretty adorable. "No. And that's not funny." She smiles anyway.

"Let me see it."

"I don't even want to touch it."

"Where is it?"

"Back in its box, just inside the front door."

I open the screen door and the box is sitting there. I get a chill just looking at it.

"Wow." I try to laugh, shake my head like it's just something stupid her ex did, but I've got this pit of unease in my stomach. Kind of like how I felt when I opened my locker this morning.

I open the box and look at the necklace. And I have to admit, it's kind of beautiful in a way. Like, part of me is almost jealous that I'm not the one who bought it for her. Did he even buy it? Maybe the crazy nutcase made it himself in his psycho dungeon workshop. I shake my head.

"What?" she says.

I look down at her, holding the box in my hands. "Nothing. Just kind of at a loss for words."

"I'm scared, Cam."

"Don't be. It's nothing."

But that's a lie and we both know it.

"I feel like something bad's about to happen. And I can't make it go away."

"You're just stressed." I sit down next to her and put the box to the side.

"Is that a message to me?" she asks, nodding at the box. "How did Derek know about the butterflies?"

"Maybe it wasn't him who put that thing in your purse. Maybe it was...Brody.

Or Raine."

"It wasn't Brody."

I give her a look.

She leans into me. "Seriously, I really don't think he has anything to do with this.

And not because I like him. I just...I have a feeling about him, that he's a good person."

"Yeah, Brody's a great guy all right. Especially when he's giving wedgies to the freshmen kids on the JV squad."

"It's not Brody," she says. "He wasn't anywhere near my bag today. And neither was Raine. It's Derek."

I sigh and stand up. "Fine. Then let's do something about it."

"Do something?"

"Yeah. Come on, get up. I'm sick of just sitting around waiting for everyone else to

make moves. We need to take control.”

“What, like a drive-by?”

I laugh. “No, not a drive-by. More like a stakeout.”

“No. No way.” She starts shaking her head like I just told her we were going to invite Raine and Derek on a weekend camping trip with us.

“You know where the guy lives, right?”

“Cam, I don’t want to go anywhere. It’s late and I’m scared.”

“I’ll protect you.”

She softens a little bit. “How?”

“Nobody’s going to hurt you when I’m around. I promise.”

She believes me. Maybe because she can tell that I mean it. “Okay,” she says, finally. “Okay. Let’s go.”

\*\*\*

Derek lives across town near Main Street, a bit of a rougher area than most people I know who go to Santa Anna. Which is probably because he doesn’t go to Santa Anna.

But the street is quiet this time of night and I park far enough away that it’s very unlikely he’d notice us even if he was looking out the window. But the house is completely dark.

“Looks like even psychos have to sleep sometime,” I joke as I turn the car off.

“Very funny.”

Natalia’s got the bracelet in her hands and she’s examining it intensely in the semi-darkness. “You think this cost a lot?” she asks.

“I don’t know.” I sit back and stare at the dark house and the car sitting empty in the driveway. “That his car?”

She looks up and nods. “Mmmhmm.”

“That car see a lot of action between you two?”

She flinches. “That’s not—“

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly, feeling horrible. “Bad joke.”

“Terrible joke. And no, for your information, that car saw very little action. All we ever really did was kiss.”

“If you don’t mind me asking...why the hell were you even dating that guy in the first place?”

She keeps playing with that necklace as she talks and I want to tell her to stop touching that thing. But I’m not sure why I want to tell her to stop so I don’t say anything. “It’s weird. I mean, the whole relationship with Derek was weird. He wasn’t my usual type of guy. He was funny but always in trouble at school, always getting kicked out of class for goofing off or something.” She pauses for awhile. “But I saw something in him. He was deeper than that, more than just some crazy troublemaker. At least, I thought he was.”

“Do you still?”

“No. We only went out for about a month and then he started acting kind of bored and distant. It seemed like he wasn’t having fun anymore, at least not with me. I’d already decided to break up with him when I started hearing the first rumors.”

I grit my teeth. Part of me is seriously considering knocking on this guy’s front door, dragging him out of his house and beating his ass right here and now.

“At first it was just weird looks and people laughing as I walked by in the halls. I thought I was just being paranoid. Pretty soon it was all over Facebook and I was getting emails calling me a slut.”

“What did he say you did?”

“Disgusting stuff. He told people I was too kinky and I’d totally freaked him out.

That I was into...” She makes a face.

“You don’t have to say it.” I grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white. “I should have knocked him out when he came up to you in the parking lot at school the other day.”

“No.” She looks at me. “I don’t want you getting into a fight over me. And besides, I have a feeling Derek can handle himself . He used to take boxing lessons.”

“He won’t have a chance to box me if I put him through a wall first.”

“Cam. Please.” She puts a hand on my shoulder and I relax.

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I kind of like it that you’re so protective.”

I stare at that car. That empty car in the driveway. “Maybe I can’t punch him, but I



can do something.”

I open the car door but she grabs me. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“I’m breaking into his damn car. Fuck it.”

I pull away and she calls after me. But I’m determined to finally actually do something about this asshole. Find out what he’s up to. Not sure if there will be anything incriminating in his car, but if not, maybe I’ll try his house next.

I hurry across the street, walking at a brisk pace. When I reach his driveway, I act like I live there and have every right to be doing what I’m doing. The last thing I need is to be acting shady and get caught by a curious neighbor.

I try the car door. Locked. But the window is open a crack so I work my hand through, gently wiggling and pushing downward until the window starts to slowly lower.

Finally I get it to where I can push my arm through, and luckily I have long arms. I reach all the way down and find the lock, then open the door. The whole process takes maybe a minute to complete.

Funny, I think. I used to complain so much about helping my dad at his locksmith company but here I am putting all my knowledge to such good use! Dad would be proud.

I slide into the front seat of Derek’s car. It smells like cologne and old cheeseburgers. Maybe that’s because of the McDonald’s bag sitting on the floor of the passenger side.

It’s so dark that I’m having a hard time even knowing where to look, but I figure the glove compartment is always a safe bet.

So I open it and hit the jackpot almost immediately.

A digital camera. I grab it and turn it on, and the battery still works. My heart's racing. I swivel around and check to make sure nobody's spotted me. So far, the coast is clear. I can see the front end of my car, but the windshield is dark and it's impossible to tell that Natalia's in there. She's probably freaking out, but this needed to be done.

Once the camera's on, I figure out how to get into the pictures. And when I see what's there, I almost feel faint. A wave of disbelief hits me as I cycle through the hundreds of shots.

"Jesus."

This is worse than that stupid necklace. Much, much worse.

I shove the camera in my pocket, then slam the glove compartment shut and roll up the window. I try to think about whether or not there's anything that would tip him off to knowing I was here, but I don't think there is. I barely even touched anything in the car. The evidence was just sitting there at the top of the glove compartment.

"Idiot," I whisper. But is he just an idiot? It seems like there's way more to him than that.

I hurry back to my car and get in. Natalia's white as a ghost.

"I can't believe you just left me like that!" she says. "And what the hell were you thinking breaking into his car?"

"Hey, relax, nothing went wrong," I say, turning the key in the ignition and driving away from the scene.

"But what if it had? What if he'd caught you? We could have gone to jail!"

I give her a sidelong glance. “Point is, nobody got caught, Natalia.”

“You’re as crazy as everyone else,” she says, looking at me in awe.

“I don’t think so. In fact, I’m pretty damn sure your old friend Derek is topping the list right about now.”

“You saw something?”

I nod.

“Tell me, Cam.”

“You need to try to stay calm.”

“Just. Tell. Me.”

I sigh. “Okay. But prepare yourself because it’s bad.”

“Duly noted.”

“I found a digital camera in his glove box.”

Natalia makes a groaning noise. “Oh, God.”

I hold it out to her and wait for the fallout.



# Chapter Three

## Natalia

Cam's holding the camera out to me, and I take it, my hands shaking. I scroll through the pictures one by one. Me, outside of school. Raine, walking in the student parking lot with Teri and Becca. Brody at football practice. Me and Adrianna at the mall.

"That asshole," I say, "I can't believe he followed me to the mall!"

"He followed you?"

"Yeah." I'm still scrolling. "He must have. I thought it was weird that he just showed up there, but ..." I trail off. "Jesus Christ." I take a deep breath. This has just gone from slightly creepy to completely and totally psychotic and scary. "I think we should call the police."

"The police? And say what?"

"Um, that my crazy ex-boyfriend has been taking creepy surveillance pictures of us?"

"Maybe," he says.

"Maybe? Don't you think this crosses the line?" I throw the camera back over to him, like that will somehow erase what's on it.

"I don't know." He shrugs. "I just..." He trails off, staring through the car window toward Derek's house.

"You just what?"

“Look, I know it probably sounds crazy, but I get the feeling that if we go to the cops, they’re not going to be able to help us.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I pull out my cell phone. “Of course they’ll be able to help us.” Won’t they? I mean, they’re the police. They’re supposed to be there to help. In fact, this is the exact kind of situation where you should call the police. Although... Cam is kind of right. I mean, what would I say? That my ex-boyfriend gave me a weird necklace? That’s not a crime. And following me and taking pictures of me is, but how could I prove this is Derek’s camera? And even if I could prove it’s Derek’s camera, how would I say I got it? Cam broke into Derek’s car, which I’m sure the police would be very interested in.

Before I can decide what to do, the door to Derek’s house starts to open.

“Get down,” Cam says, and we both scrunch down in the front seat.

“Why didn’t we park around the corner?” I ask.

“Did you really want to be walking around out there in the dark, exposed?”

Him saying the word “exposed” breaks the somber mood a little bit and makes me want to laugh. He must see the look on my face, because he reaches over and puts a finger to my lips. “Shhh,” he says.

We hear the sound of a car starting, and Cam lifts his head up and peeks through the windshield. “What the fuck?”

I sit up a little bit too, peering over the dashboard.

“Who is that?” I ask. A familiar-looking girl with white blonde hair is walking down Derek’s driveway. She gets into a black sedan that’s parked on the street, then starts it up and drives away.

“It’s Brody’s sister,” Cam says, glancing at me and not even trying to keep the “I told you so” sound out of his voice.

“Brody’s sister?” I say. “What the fuck? I thought she was in rehab.”

“So did I.” He starts up the car.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“We’re following her.”

\*\*\*

Twenty minutes later, we watch as Brody’s sister pulls her car into the driveway of Brody’s house. She cuts the engine and walks inside, turning the outside light off after she shuts the front door.

“Well, that was a little anticlimactic,” I say.

“What?” Cam’s looking out the window, distracted.

“I thought there was going to be a high speed chase or something.” I’m joking, but Cam doesn’t look like he thinks it’s that funny.

“I think Brody’s sister being at Derek’s is a little more dangerous than a high-speed chase.” He’s looking straight ahead, his mouth set in a straight line, and his tone is kind of harsh.

“Are you mad at me?” I ask.

“No,” he says, sighing. “I’m sorry, I just.. I’m stressed out. And I wish you could admit that Brody might be mixed up in this somehow.”

“Fine,” I say, “Brody might be mixed up in this somehow.” I don’t want to believe it, but seeing Brody’s sister coming out of Derek’s house is kind of hard to ignore. I think about that day with Brody in Harvard Square, how we ran into his sister and how the two of them got into some kind of fight.

Suddenly, I’m exhausted. I lean my head back against the seat and close my eyes as Cam keeps driving down Brody’s street. I must drift off for a few seconds, because the next thing I know, Cam’s pulling into a twenty-four hour gas station. “Should we be stopping here?” I ask sleepily. “What if someone sees us out together?”

“It’s after midnight,” Cam says. “And besides, I don’t have enough gas to get you home.” He turns the car off and unbuckles his seatbelt, then opens the door and heads toward the pumps.

I pull the white butterfly necklace out of my pocket and sit there for a while, staring at it, my mind racing with everything that’s gone on tonight. After a couple of minutes, a car pulls up at the pump in front of us, and Becca gets out. Shit. Becca!

What the hell is she doing here?

I try to slump down in my seat, but before I can, she turns around and we lock eyes through the windshield. I see the look of surprise that crosses her face, but then she gives me a bitchy smile and saunters over to Cam’s car.

“Well, well, well,” she says to me through the open window. “What are you two crazy kids up to?”

“How’s your face?” I ask.

She just grins, and Cam, probably hearing our voices, comes around from the back where he’s been pumping the gas.



“Hi, Becca,” he says. He doesn’t sound nervous at all. “Me and Natalia were just hanging out at Brody’s, and Brody had a little bit to drink, so I offered to drive her home.” This isn’t the exactly the best story for him to come up with, since I’m sure if Becca tells Raine, Raine will check with Brody. And I really doubt that Brody’s going to go along with our lie, or be thrilled that Cam and I were hanging out.

“Really?” Becca asks, like she doesn’t believe it.

“Really,” Cam says. “How are you doing? Have you seen Aiden lately?”

“Does Raine know about this?”

“Does Raine know about what?” Cam asks, but now his voice sounds a little more strained.

“That you’re out with her.” She looks at me like I’m a piece of trailer trash or something.

“No,” Cam says. “And I wasn’t out with her. Like I said, we ran into each other at Brody’s.”

“Ri-iight,” she says.

“We did,” I tell her, nodding as if that’s going to make it true.

She turns to look at me, a smirk on her face. “If you expect me to believe that, you’re even dumber than I thought.” She flips her long blonde hair over her shoulder, then pulls her phone out, probably to text Raine and tattle on us.

“Stop,” I tell her. “You’re not telling Raine.” And before I know what I’m doing, I’m out of the car and trying to grab the phone out of her hands.

“Knock it off,” she says, shouldering me off and turning away from me.

The fact that she acts like I'm not a threat makes me madder than I already am, and so I try to reach for the phone again.

"What the hell is your *problem*?" she asks.

"Well, I punched you once, right?" I say. "So you can't be too surprised that I'd start messing with you again."

She rolls her eyes at me, then starts to text Raine again. But this time she falters for a second, and when she does, a weird rush flows through my body. It's not heat, although it does make me feel hot. It's more like a jolt of something, not electricity, but close to it.

"You are not," I say, moving toward her. "Going to tell Raine about this. You're going to go back to your car, get in, drive away, and forget you ever saw us here."

Becca nods, but not in fear. It's more like she's in a trance or something. I turn and watch as she walks away, slides into her car, and then pulls out of the parking lot.

It's only when she's gone that I realize I'm still clutching the white butterfly necklace, and that it's burning red hot in my hand.



# Chapter Four

## Campbell

Becca drives off and I look at Natalia, see her holding that necklace. Her eyes are wide and her lips are pressed tightly together. “Hey!” I say, snapping my fingers in front of her face. She looks at me and blinks a few times. “What the hell was that?”

She doesn’t answer. But I know what that was, I’ve seen it before. When Raine did that weird stuff with her parents, having them fetch me beer when they’d just been screaming about underage drinking ten minutes beforehand.

And what about Aiden and Becca? Same thing.

I take a step back. “You...you can do it too.”

“Wait, what? Do what? Cam.”

“You’re like them, Nat. Like Raine.”

“No, I’m not.” She looks down at the necklace in her hand and then stuffs it in her pocket.

“You controlled Becca just now. I saw you do it. She was about to rat us out to Raine and then you told her to forget it and she just....obeyed you.”

“Cam, come on.” She laughs but her eyes tell a different story. “That’s crazy.”

“Nat—”

“I didn’t do anything. I’m not some evil witch.”

“I didn’t say you were evil. Maybe it’s that necklace.”

She crosses her arms. "Take me home, okay?"

"Yeah. Come on."

We get back in the car and start driving toward her house. Neither of us say anything most of the way home. She picks up Derek's camera at one point and starts scrolling through the pictures again.

Finally, I park outside her house and leave the car running. I feel kind of bad about saying all of that stuff to her, freaking her out.

She starts to grab her purse and I put my hand on her arm. "Hey."

"No, you shouldn't touch me. I might infect you or something."

"Nat, I didn't mean it that way. I know you're one of the good ones."

She looks at me with watery eyes. "I'm not one of anything."

"I didn't...come on. You have to admit, it's been a crazy night," I say, smiling.

"But it was worth it to see Becca put in her place."

Natalia grins. "That was pretty cool." Then her smile fades and is replaced by concern. "But how did I do it?"

"I don't know."

"What if you're right? What if I'm like Raine?"

"You're not."

“You don’t know that.”

“Actually, I do know it.”

“How?”

“This is how.” I lean in and kiss her full lips. At first it seems as if she might push me away, but then she presses against me and we kiss for a long time. I love the way it feels. And it’s the opposite of how it feels when I’m with Raine. Raine makes me drunk, disoriented, sick and weak.

Natalia makes me feel...like myself. But somehow better.

“You get it now?” I say when we finally break away. “If I did that with Raine they’d probably have to take me to the emergency room.”

“So that’s how you figured out I’m not evil? By kissing me? Convenient.”

I nod. “We’ll have to check periodically,” I say. “Make sure nothing’s changed.”

“Right. Of course.” She laughs. “I should go.”

“You can text me if anything comes up...”

She gets out of the car.

“Nat.”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful, okay?” She nods and waves, then heads into her house. I wait until she’s safely inside before pulling out of the driveway and heading home.

The next day I wonder if there will be any fallout from Becca catching us together at the gas station. But there's none.

When Raine sees me in the hallway for the first time, she's her usual self.

"Hi, sexy." She smiles.

Becca and Teri are following behind her like good little lackeys.

"Hey. What's going on?" I say, acting casual but interested, even though everything in me wants to get away from this chick.

"Nothing. Haven't heard from you in ages." She raises an eyebrow. In the past I would have found this hot, but not anymore.

"Oh. Yeah, well, football's been hectic and—"

"Whatever. Have you heard the big news?"

"Ummm...I don't think so."

"We're a foursome now! You, me, Aiden, and Becca. Isn't that crazy?" Raine says.

"Totally," Becca says. "At first I was like, how can I be into...well...Aiden...you know...but now I'm like...totally into it."

"Great sentiment there, Becca," I tell her, "Well said."

"Don't be a jerk, Cam," Raine says, play-hitting me on the shoulder. "Aren't you going to support your friend and my friend finding romance?"

“Of course. I’m their biggest fan. In fact, I’m the one that named them.”

“Named them?”

“Baiden. They’re the new Brangelina.”

“Baiden! That’s so classic.” Raine and Teri laugh but Becca looks slightly annoyed.

“Anyway, see you at lunch?” Raine asks.

“Always.”

They trot off and I breathe a sigh of relief. At least Raine didn’t try and kiss me.

\*\*\*

Gym class is getting weird.

First off, Brody’s in this class, and even though we’re pretending to be cool with each other, we’re actually not. When we do happen to talk, it’s never about anything except football and even that’s awkward.

And we’ve gotten competitive.

It’s basketball again today, only this time Brody and I are on opposite teams. Of course we have to guard one another because we’re the tallest and strongest guys on the floor.

At first we just take some jumpers. He hits a few and I hit a few. I try and play off of him and let him hit his shots.

But then on one play he pump fakes and drives to the hoop, practically dunking.



The whole class cheers and he gives me a wink on his way back down the court. "Just a little taste of what I can do when I want to bring my A game, Campbell."

I hate that he calls me by my full name when almost no one else does.

And he's basically calling me out in front of everyone. Okay, then, I guess we'll go hard. I've let Brody think he's bigger, stronger, and tougher than me for long enough.

That's all about to change.

When we next get the ball, I spot up and hit a three.

"It's on!" Brody yells with a smile.

He takes the rock and tries to fake me out again with the exact same move as before and I steal it, go coast to coast and lay it up.

Now the whole class is pretty much just watching us go one on one. Brody isn't smiling anymore. He tries to dribble by me once, twice, three times. Each time my defense is too much and he can't get past. His face is starting to drip sweat.

"That was just a taste, huh?" I whisper as he tries to back me toward the hoop.

"That seemed more like the whole enchilada. I don't think you have anything else on tap, bro."

He spins and tries a hook shot and I swat it away..

"Big man, huh?" he says.

"Nope. Just bigger than you."

He takes the ball in again and this time I strip it. As I go to hit my layup I feel him try to come and steal the ball from behind. So I stop and pivot abruptly, planning to catch him with an elbow to his midsection when I turn.

Only—it's not Brody coming from behind, it's Aiden. And I don't catch him in the chest, he's too short for that. My elbow catches him on the nose.

He drops like a sack of potatoes. His nose is gushing blood.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he says.

"Shit, man, I'm so sorry."

"Asshole."

The teacher comes over and gives him a towel to hold against his nose.

Brody walks over, shaking his head and smiling wryly. "Another classic move, Cam. You sure do know how to treat your friends right."

"It was an accident."

"I guess scoring points in gym class is more important than your best friend's nose?" Brody asks.

"I'll walk you to the nurse's office," I tell Aiden.

Aiden shrugs. "Fine. I don't care."

As we leave the gym, I hear Brody call out: "You took three steps on that last layup kid!"

And then we're out and the door slams behind us with an echo. As we cross the

school foyer, I give Aiden a look. He's still holding that big white towel on his nose. I can see some red staining it, but it doesn't seem to be all that bad.

"Dude, I'm sorry."

He stops and checks the towel, wipes his nose. "What do you have against me Cam? Did I shit in your Cheerios or something?"

"Shit in my Cheerios?"

"Yeah, did I do something to make you want to ruin my life?"

"Oh, I see. Shit in my Cheerios is the hot new catch phrase."

"Fine. Be a dick." He starts walking again.

"Hey, come on. I'm just trying to lighten the mood," I say, picking up my stride to catch up with him.

We start climbing the stairs together. "I don't need you to lighten my mood.

Why don't you try not interfering in my life?"

"Hey, if you're talking about the other day—"

He turns again and looks at me, only this time his jaw is trembling. "I passed out this morning. In the bathroom."

This statement stops me in my tracks. I feel that now familiar sensation of dread in my stomach. "What do you mean, you passed out? Like, fainted?"

"I think that's pretty much the definition."

“I told you Aiden, didn’t I? Didn’t I warn you?”

He shakes his head, checks the bloody towel again. “She likes me. She told me that after the dance she’s going to...” he clams up.

“I can pretty well imagine what she promised you, but it’s bullshit.”

“You think it’s all a big lie?”

I sigh. I don’t want to make him feel bad about the first girl that’s ever taken an interest in him. But this is too important. “Sorry, man, but she’s playing you.”

“Yeah.” He looks down at the floor, his face falling. “Yeah,” he says quietly.

“Deep down I guess I kind of figured that.”

“They’re dangerous, Aiden. I need you to know that.”

“Dangerous? Like with the Camerade stuff? You think they’re vampires or something?”

“No. Not vampires. Something else.”

He looks around, but there’s nobody in the hallway or stairs. The school feels almost empty. “Like...what are they then?”

I shrug. “Maybe witches.”

“Witches.” He laughs and stuffs the towel back under his nose. “You’ve lost it.

Witches? Really?”

“Really.” And so, despite my better judgment, I tell him about the night I spied on

Raine and Becca and Teri and how Raine made the light shatter just by looking at it.

Aiden keeps shaking his head as if he doesn't believe me, but his face is getting pale. "That's cartoon stuff. It can't be real."

"It is. I know it sounds crazy but it's totally real." I don't tell him about Natalia, though. I don't want to complicate an already messy situation.

"And you think Becca is casting a spell on me or something?"

"Draining you. Like what Raine did to me."

He looks at me for a long time. "But that is kind of a vampire, isn't it?"

"They don't suck your blood though."

"Not yet anyway." He shakes his head and laughs, but it's a hollow sound. "Just my luck. A hot chick finally wants to bang me and it turns out she's a creepy witch trying to kill me."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugs. We keep walking and then we get to the nurse's office.

"I think I'm going to go home," he says. "I don't want to be here right now."

"Aiden...listen." I feel so bad for him. It seems like all I ever do is hurt the kid.

But he smiles. "It's okay, Cam. You don't need to say anything else.

Just...thanks. Thanks for telling me."

And then he goes into the nurse's office. And I just stand there, watching him go.



# Chapter Five

## Natalia

Over the next couple of days, Cam and I try to come up with some kind of plan to deal with this whole fucked up situation. But we're totally out of our element, and everything we even consider doing seems silly or unrealistic.

And even though we've been talking a lot, I feel like he's kind of been keeping his distance. He's nice, but guarded, and I'm afraid it might have something to do with what I did to Becca.

Not that I can blame him. I mean, I'm freaked out by it myself. How am I supposed to be able to make sense of what happened? Or consider the possibility that I can control minds? That I'm some kind of witch?

On Saturday night Brody invites me to his game, but I'm barely keeping my mental state together, and so instead I spend the night holed up in my room, faking sick so that my mom won't bother me.

I fall into a fitful sleep at around one in the morning, but I'm up again at five am, my mind racing, unable to stay calm. And the longer I lie there, the more worked up I get. And the more worked up I get, the angrier I start to feel.

I mean, this is bullshit. Lying here, being afraid, not knowing what to do. It's ridiculous. If something bad is going to happen, if Raine and her friends have some kind of powers, if I have some kind of powers, I'm not going to get answers by being afraid.

I'm going to have to find them myself. And I know just who to ask. I flip back the covers and get out of bed, being careful to be quiet so that I don't wake my mom. I pull on a pair of jeans and a soft pink fleece, then slide my feet into my sneakers and shrug on my coat.



I grab the keys off the hook by the door and head out to my mom's car. It's freezing out, and so I turn the heat up full blast, then pull out of the driveway and head toward Brody's house.

\*\*\*

When I'm a couple of streets away, I call him. I wanted to be able to take him by surprise and just ring the doorbell, but I was afraid his parents or, worse, his sister might answer, and so I had to compromise.

My call goes to voicemail, but his car's in the driveway, so I know he's home. I call him again. Again no answer. The third time he picks up, sounding sleepy.

"Hey," he says. "Why weren't you at the game last night? I looked for you."

Brody called me a couple of times last night when he got home from his game, I guess to find out where I was. But I didn't answer, mostly because I just didn't feel like dealing with it.

"Sorry," I say, "I wasn't feeling so good. But I'm here now."

"Where?"

"Outside your house."

I hear rustling on the other end of the line, and then I see him peering out one of the upstairs windows. "Hi," he says. "It's a little early for a visit, isn't it?" His tone sounds teasing, and it could definitely just be my imagination, but I feel like maybe he sounds a little nervous, too.

"I couldn't wait to see you," I say. "Any chance you want to buy me breakfast?"

He hesitates. "Sure," he says. "I'll be right down."

He appears a few minutes later, wearing jeans and a puffy black jacket, hunched against the chilliness of the air. He opens the passenger door and slides in.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi." I pull out of the driveway and onto his street.

"So why are you up so early?" he asks.

"Just couldn't sleep." I shrug. "I guess I was thinking about you." It's not even really a lie. I was thinking about him, even if it wasn't in a romantic way.

"That's sweet." He's in the glove compartment now, rustling through my mom's collection of CDs. "Do you know your mom has Billy Cyrus in here? Unless it's yours."

He turns to me, a smile on his face, but then he realizes where we're not going the right way. "This isn't the way," he says. "Denny's is the only thing open right now, and that's left off my street, toward the middle of town."

"I know," I say.

"So then where we going?"

"A different place," I say. "A place I know."

"Cool."

We drive for a few more miles, out onto Route 112, and then I pull the car over onto the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“So what’s going on?” I ask, turning toward him in my seat.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s going on? With Raine? The butterflies, the weird voodoo shit, everything.”

He looks at me like I’m crazy, and then his face breaks into a grin. “Is this a joke? Some kind of weird thing you’re doing? To ask me to homecoming? Natalia, I told you I think all that stuff’s cheesy.”

“It’s not a joke.” I take a deep breath . “Brody, I saw your sister coming out of Derek’s house.”

He frowns. “I don’t get it.”

“Your sister,” I say, “Was coming out of my ex-boyfriend’s house. My ex-boyfriend who’s been stalking me.”

“Yeah, well, she knows a lot of shady characters.” He shrugs. “Was your ex-boyfriend ever in rehab? You’d be surprised how many romances start there.”

“What do you know about Raine and the Triad?”

“Um, that they’re stuck up bitches?” But I’m not laughing. He sighs. “Natalia, please, let’s go to breakfast. We can talk about whatever this is there. I’m starving.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” We sit there in silence, and suddenly, for no good reason, I’m convinced that he knows something he’s not telling me. And it really pisses me off. So I do something I haven’t done since the other night. Something I haven’t even let myself *think* about doing. I look at Brody, and I say, “You’re going to tell me what you know about Raine, and you’re going to do it now.”

He sucks in a big breath, almost like it’s painful. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says. “And honestly, you’re kind of starting to freak me out.”

I’m getting that same rush, the same feeling of electricity and warmth and something unexplainable, so I try again. “Brody, tell me what Raine and the Triad are up to. Tell me about what they’re trying to do with Cam. Tell me what the butterflies mean.”

He puts his head in his hands then, almost like he’s in pain, and I’m pretty sure I’ve got him. But then he turns to me, and suddenly, it’s like his whole face has changed.

“Natalia,” he says, “Please stop doing that. It might work on other people, but it isn’t going to work on me.”

## **ENTICED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book Six)**

**by Lauren Barnholdt & Aaron Gorvine**

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental



# Chapter One

## Natalia

“What do you mean, that won’t work on you?” I ask Brody. I’m trying to play it cool, but inside, I’m terrified. I’m alone, in a car with a guy who may or may not be involved in something shady and/or want to hurt me, and I’m trying to use some kind of weird powers on him to get him to do what I want. This is so not how my junior year was supposed to be starting. Why can’t everything be normal, with my biggest problems being stressing over my Spanish grade?

“I mean,” Brody says, turning his head and looking at me. “That you shouldn’t try to do that mind control bullshit, because it doesn’t work on me.” He doesn’t sound mad, though, just exasperated.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lie. I look around, trying to figure out how I can escape if it comes to that. What the hell was I thinking, taking Brody out to an abandoned road and trying to get him to tell me what he knows about Raine and the Triad? I figured if I got him isolated that he wouldn’t be able to get out of the car or walk away if he didn’t want to answer my questions --but I forgot to take into consideration that being isolated meant that I couldn’t get away, either. What a ridiculously horrible plan.

“Chill,” Brody says, rolling his eyes. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’m chilled.”

“I saw you looking for an escape route.”

“Yeah, well, ‘I’m not going to hurt you’ is what psychos say right before they hurt you.”

“I’m not a psycho,” he says, “And you’ve been watching way too many horror

movies.” Then he sighs and puts his head back in his hands. I can tell he’s debating something, and then he takes a deep breath, and slouches back against the seat in defeat.

“Listen, let’s just go to breakfast, okay?”

“You want to go to *Denny’s*?” Is he crazy? “No fucking way.”

He grins. “It’s sexy when you swear.”

I tap my fingers against the steering wheel.

“Come on,” he says, “I’m hungry.”

“No.”

“You’ll be in a public place,” he says.

I hesitate. “And if we go, then you’ll tell me what’s going on?”

“Yes,” he says, “Then I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “How do I know you don’t have your minions waiting at the restaurant, ready to take me out?”

“A, I don’t have any minions, and B, even if I did, Denny’s wouldn’t be the place I’d choose for an ambush.” He turns to look at me then, really look at me. Staring into his eyes like that makes me a little uncomfortable, but I don’t turn away, mostly because I don’t want to show any weakness. “Besides,” he says, “You really think I would do that?” He seems genuinely hurt.

“I don’t know anything anymore,” I say truthfully.

“Please,” he says, reaching over and putting his hand on mine. “Let’s go eat.

And I’ll tell you everything.”

“Fine,” I say, pulling the car back onto the street. “But you’re still paying.”

\*\*\*

Twenty minutes later, a middle-aged Denny’s waitress is setting two menus down in front of us. But I’m not hungry. At all. Apparently Brody doesn’t feel the same way, because without even looking at the menu, he orders a double stack of pancakes with apples and whipped cream, bacon, home fries, coffee, and a chocolate milk.

“Just coffee for me, thanks,” I say. The waitress gives me a dirty look, I guess because she’s worried about her tip, and then leaves without saying anything.

“So talk,” I say.

Brody folds his hands in front of him on the table. He stays silent.

“I’m waiting.”

“I know.”

“So then what are you doing?”

“Trying to figure out how much you can handle.”

“I can handle anything.”

The waitress returns and slams two coffees down in front of us. I pick up the creamer and dump some in.



“Then why are you shaking?” Brody asks.

“What?”

“Why are your hands shaking if you can handle anything?”

“My hands aren’t shaking.” But as I slide my spoon into the coffee and stir it, the metal clinks against the sides of the mug. I quickly set the spoon down on my napkin.

“So is it real?”

“Is what real?” Brody asks. He takes a sip of his coffee. The fact that he’s so calm is kind of unnerving.

“The whole thing with Raine,” I say.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, it’s real.” He’s still sipping his coffee all calm, like it’s nothing. Like he didn’t just announce that there are witches in our midst.

“They’re witches?”

“Yes.”

“And...” I take a deep breath and then just say it. “Am I?”

He hesitates. “Natalia...”

“Brody,” I say, “Just tell me. I can handle it.”

“You are,” he says, “But not like them. You’re...different.”

“Different how?”

“Different.”

“So I’m not evil?”

He sets his cup down and looks at me over the table. “Is that what you think?

That you’re evil?”

“Kind of,” I say, finally voicing the horrible, dark thought that I’d been wrestling with these past few days, ever since the night I ran into Becca at the gas station. I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes, and I look out the window and blink hard, determined not to let Brody see me cry.

“You’re not evil.” He reaches over and takes my hand, and I pull my gaze from the window and down to our intertwined fingers. I don’t say anything, not trusting myself to talk. “And who told you that you were evil?” Brody asks. “Cam?”

“No,” I say, “Cam didn’t say that.”

He raises his eyebrows like he doesn’t believe it. “Natalia, it’s important that you don’t listen to what Cam says.”

“Yeah?” pull my hand away from his. “Well, Cam says I shouldn’t listen to what *you* say.”

“That’s because Cam doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.”

“And you do?”

“Yes.”

“How? Are you a witch too?”

“No.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m... a neutral party.”

The waitress returns, setting down Brody’s ginormous stack of food. She refills my coffee from the pot she’s holding in her other hand.

“You change your mind?” she asks me. “You want to order something?”

“No, thanks.”

“She’s a little hungover,” Brody says, rolling his eyes at the waitress. “Rough night of partying, and so, you know – “ He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Her stomach.”

“You know what?” I say, glaring at him. “I think I will have something. An omelette. Ham and cheese. And bacon.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me,” Brody says when the waitress is gone.

He digs into his pancakes. “Delicious,” he says, “You want some?” He holds the fork out to me, and even though I’m not hungry, I lean over and let him put the food in my mouth.

“They’re good,” I say.

“Best 2.99 pancakes you’ll ever have.” He takes another bite, then wipes his mouth and sets his fork down. “Natalia, I’m serious. You have to stay away from Cam.”

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t, something bad is going to happen. To you and to him.”

“If Raine’s evil, if she’s a witch, then how do I know you’re not?” I ask him, deciding to ignore the part about me staying away from Cam. “Your sister was coming out of Derek’s house, Brody.” A look passes across his face, and I can tell I’ve surprised him, even though he’s trying not to show it. “You didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Well, that psycho has been taking pictures of all of us, did you know that?”

“No,” he says, “But I’m not surprised. Derek’s a bad guy, Natalia.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I say. “And if your sister was hanging out with him, how do I know you’re not bad, too?”

“You have to trust me.”

I laugh. “Right.”

But Brody isn’t laughing. He’s staring back at me, serious.

“So what is it?” I ask. “What’s this bad thing that’s going to happen?”

He hesitates. “I can’t tell you.”

“Are you kidding? You can’t tell me? That’s bullshit. So far you haven’t told me anything. And I’m not going to stay away from Cam. Not unless you can give me a

little more information.”

“You’re not going to stay away from Cam? It shouldn’t be that hard. You barely know him.” I look away quickly, but not quickly enough. “Natalia,” he says, “Please tell me you haven’t been hanging out with Cam.”

“I haven’t been hanging out with Cam?”

“Jesus Christ,” he says.

“I’m not going to stay away from Cam unless you tell me exactly what this bad thing is that going to happen.”

“I told you, I can’t,” he says. “But you have to... Look, I don’t want to scare you, but Raine’s dangerous. And she’ll do anything to keep Cam close.”

“She’d hurt me just because of some boy?”

“Listen,” he says, reaching over and squeezing my hand. “You have to trust me.

You have to stay away from Cam, and close to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m the only one who can keep you safe.”

And for some reason, in that moment, I start to believe him.



# Chapter Two

## Campbell

Natalia's been ignoring me.

I can't figure this girl out. One minute we're kissing and I'm her knight in shining armor and the next, it's like I don't even exist.

Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but last night I sent her a few texts and she never responded at all. I sent her another one this morning just wondering if she was okay and she gave a very brief reply.

*I'm fine thx. See u later?*

See me later? No conversation about her crazy ex and those pictures we found, no theories about what we should do next with the Triad...nothing. Just an *"I'm fine, thanks,"* like I'm some random idiot bothering her and she's trying to blow me off as nicely as possible.

It's put me in an irritable mood.

On the drive in to school, Aiden is back to his old self but I'm out of sorts.

"Is it bad that I still want to go to the dance with Becca?" he says.

I give him a look. "Is it bad? Define bad."

"Well, look. I know she's not really into me, but can't I still hang out with her and get the benefits?"

"There are no benefits, Aiden. I explained this to you already."

“She might still let me touch her boobs though. Benefit number one.”

“She might suck the life out of you before you’ve gotten your greasy paw on it.

But yeah, maybe Becca will flash you a nip before she steals your life force. Maybe that’s worth it to you?”

I downshift as we cross Main and Lincoln. An old man and woman are walking arm and arm on the sidewalk and it makes me think of Nat. I wonder if someday we’ll be that old couple, holding hands and reminiscing about the crazy times we had in our youth. Something tells me that old couple wasn’t dealing with the shit we’re dealing with, though. They had trivial problems. Like the Depression.

“A nipple might not be worth it. But if I recover in a day or two like you did, then maybe it is. I’m not sure.” Aiden fiddles with the strap on his backpack and I shake my head.

“You’re joking but it’s not funny, dude. What are you gonna tell Becca?”

“I don’t know. What are you going to tell Raine? I mean, she doesn’t know you plan on bailing either.” He gives me a long look.

“I have to go.”

“Oh, I get it. So you get to have your cake and eat it too, but I don’t?”

I frown. “It’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because. I’m not using it as an excuse to get laid.”

“Bullshit.”



“I’m trying to keep her from getting suspicious. You just want to go so you can get your rocks off with Becca...which is never going to happen.”

“It already did, remember? She already touched—“

“Please.” I hold up my hand. “Spare me the details. I know what you told me the other day. But trust me, that was just a tease to hook you in.”

He smiles a little. “You think you’re so smart,” he says softly.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t give me shit, Aiden.”

He shrugs. “Can we talk about something other than the Triad for a change?”

I speed up as we get closer to school and try to think of something else to talk about. But all I can think of is Natalia.

\*\*\*

When I get to school, I really want to catch Natalia alone to find out if something’s happened, but she won’t really look at me. She’s in the hallway talking with her friend Adrianna and I can’t find a good time to make my move.

A little later in the morning, she’s finally alone and I’m about to go talk to her when I hear someone calling my name frantically. It’s Raine, of course, at the worst possible time—she seems to have a sixth sense for that sort of thing.

“Cam, honey, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” Her cadre of witches waves at

me but Teri and Becca drop back to talk to Brody and a bunch of other kids while Raine keeps heading my way.

“Looking everywhere for me? I’m always in the same places every day.”

She does the eyebrow raise. “Oh, no, you’re not. You’re very crafty, like a wily little fox.”

“No. I’m just hanging out like always.”

She laughs like I just said the funniest joke of all time. She drapes her arm on my shoulder and leans in. I can smell peppermint on her breath and her blonde hair brushes against my face.

“So what did you want to talk about?” I say, as I see Brody leave the one group and approach Natalia. The two of them begin talking and walking away together.

*That should be us, I think.*

“The dance of course!” Raine says.

“Go for it.” I pull away from her and pretend to look at my cell, when really I just don’t want to chance her getting her hooks into me and somehow draining my life force.

I don’t know how she does it, maybe just by touching me. Either way, the further away I am from Raine Marsden, the better.

“So, Aiden and Becca were talking and they thought it would be fun if we all rented a limo and went together. Wouldn’t that be hilarious?”

“Aiden suggested that?” I try not to let her see my annoyance. What the hell is that kid thinking?

“Well, I don’t know whose idea it was,” Raine says, waving a hand. “All I know is that it will be hysterical watching Aiden and Becca’s drunk make out session. Maybe I’ll take video and then threaten to release the tape. She’ll be paying me off for, like, the rest of her life.”

I pretend to laugh. “Good stuff. But I don’t know if it’s such a great idea to all go together. I mean, you don’t know Aiden. He can be a real pain.”

Suddenly Raine’s face gets this weird, flat look and her eyes kind of glaze over.

She stares at me and I feel...I don’t know. Just. Strange.

“It’s a really good idea,” she says in this slow voice.

“It is?”

“One of the best ideas ever. You can’t wait to go to the dance with us.”

I lick my lips. For a long while, I feel like time sort of slows down. And I’m just kind of standing there thinking about it and realizing that it does sound kind of fun. I mean, picture the madness of Aiden and Becca and me and Raine—not to mention Teri—

all hanging out together, drinking, partying, getting wild.

I’m a freaking teenager, in the prime of life. I can’t be getting so serious about everything. Whatever’s going on between Raine and Natalia, I should just drop it for awhile and try to enjoy myself.

*But you need to keep them away from Aiden.*

He can take care of himself.

I shake my head as if to clear the cobwebs. “Actually, it does sound like a pretty good idea,” I say. I throw my arm around her. “You better be ready though because I’m intending to party like a rock star.”

We go down the hall together.



# Chapter Three

## Natalia

“Okay,” I tell Adrianna. “Now just go over there, and ask him.”

She pulls on her hair and looks across the hall to where Lancaster is standing near his locker with some of his friends from the football team. Cam, thankfully, isn’t around.

It’s the end of school on Monday, and I’ve kind of been avoiding him all day. Not on purpose. I mean, it wasn’t a conscious choice or anything. I meant to text him this afternoon, I just... I didn’t really know what to say to him. Am I supposed to tell him what Brody said? It’s not like Brody specifically told me not to. But still. It’s confusing.

“Hello?” Adrianna asks, waving her fingers in front of my face. “Are you listening?”

“Yes, of course,” I tell her, even though I haven’t been. “But, um, maybe you could repeat that last part?”

“Well, the short version is that I don’t know what to say to him.”

“How about ‘Lancaster, will you go to the dance with me?’”

“I can’t call him Lancaster!”

“Why not?”

“You don’t call a guy by his last name when you’re asking him out to the dance.”

“Well, what’s his first name?”

She hesitates. “Tony.”

“Ohmigod,” I say, “You totally didn’t even know his first name!”

“I did!” she says. “It just took me a second to remember it.” We’re both laughing now. “Seriously, though.” She hugs her books to her chest. “Won’t he think it’s weird that I didn’t plan some big display? It’s tradition.”

“It’s too late to plan some big display,” I say. Which is what I’ve been telling her ever since we got to school this morning. “The dance is on Friday. Besides, if you planned some big display, then you would probably end up chickening out. And screw tradition, your fabulous enough without some stupid show.”

“You’re right.” She bites her lip. “Okay, I’m going.”

“Wait.” I reach into my bag and pull out my bottle of Kate Spade’s Twirl, my favorite perfume of the moment. I spritz it into the air, and Adrianna walks through the cloud.

“Thanks,” she says. She’s gripping my hand so tight it hurts. “You’ll wait right here, right?”

“Right.”

I turn and watch as she starts walking toward Lancaster. She taps him on the shoulder, and I move around a corner so that I can see her but she can’t see me. I don’t want her to think she has an audience, and God forbid Lancaster saw me, he’d probably think she was some loser who needed a chaperone. Not that I’m really chaperoning her, I mean, obviously I’m a few feet away but it’s still ---

“Ahh!” I yell as someone taps me on the shoulder. I drop my math book on the ground.

“That’s weird,” Cam says, “I didn’t think you were the type to scare easy. But I’m starting to think I was wrong about that.”

I bend down to pick up my book. My math homework has come loose from where I stuck it between the pages, and it’s all over the place. I start to gather up the papers. “I’m *not* the type to scare easy,” I say, “But when someone sneaks up on me--”

“I wasn’t sneaking up on you,” he says. He’s down on the ground with me now, helping me pick up my papers. We both reach for the same sheet at the same time, and our hands brush against each other. Heat pulses through my body, and I look down quickly, hoping he won’t notice the affect he has on me.

“So where’ve you been?” he asks. “I texted you last night.”

“I know,” I say, “Sorry, I was tired and I had all this math homework.” I gesture to all the pages. “I was going to text you this afternoon when I got home.”

“Bullshit.”

“I was!”

“Natalia, please,” he says. “Don’t lie to me.” He hands me the pages he’s holding, and I shove them back in my book. We both stand up, and I’m struck by how tall he is, how built, how amazing it would feel for him to just wrap his arms around my waist and pull me close.

“Fine,” I say, “I was going to text you back, but... I didn’t know what to say to you, because---“ I take a deep breath and decide to just go for it ---yesterday I had breakfast with Brody.”

I thought maybe Cam’s mouth would drop, or he’d get really upset, or at least ... I don’t know, *something*. Punch a locker or whatever it is guys do when they get



really pissed off. But his face shows no reaction. “And?”

“And he said they’re witches.”

“No shit,” he says, “What did he say about his part in it?”

“He said that he can keep us safe.” It’s a lie, of course. I mean, Brody didn’t really say he could keep Cam safe. In fact, he didn’t really bring Cam up at all except to say that I shouldn’t listen to anything he said.

“And you believe him?”

“Kind of,” I say weakly.

“What did he say about his sister being at Derek’s?”

“Well, nothing,” I say. “I mean, there was a lot he couldn’t tell me, but — “

“A lot he *couldn’t tell you*? What did he say about the butterflies? And about Raine sucking the life out of me?”

“Cam,” I say, shaking my head at him. “Stop. This is serious, Brody couldn’t —

he can’t--“ I’m trying to figure out a way to explain it to him, but it sounds ridiculous, even to me.

“No,” Cam says, cutting me off. “You know what’s fucking serious? That Raine came up to me in the hall earlier, and I liked it. That she’s putting some kind of fucking spell on me, and I have to let her, because if I don’t, someone’s going to get hurt.”

I nod. “Someone *is* going to get hurt,” I say, “But Brody, he can protect us, he can — “

“He can *protect us*? Are you fucking crazy?”

“Cam,” I say. But it’s too late. He’s too mad, and there’s no bringing him back.

“No,” Cam says. “If you think he can protect you, then let him. Let him take care of you.”

He turns and starts to walk down the hall, and I start to go after him, but before I can, Adrianna’s back, pulling on my arm. “He said yes!” she yells.

“That’s awesome,” I say, watching as Cam disappears into a crowd of kids near the junior staircase. Adrianna follows my gaze.

“Forget about him, Natalia,” she says. “You have Brody. Cam’s not – “

“I know,” I say, forcing myself to smile. “So tell me everything.”

“Well,” she says, “He was standing there, you know, and so I went up to him and I was like – “

“You’re going with Lancaster?” a voice asks. Raine. She’s standing behind us, not carrying any books or a bag or anything. She has one hand on her hip, her fingers resting lazily on her slim waist.

“Yes,” Adrianna says, raising her chin, challenging Raine to say anything. I wonder if she’d be so bold if she knew what Raine was capable of.

“Great,” Raine says, “So now I guess you two losers are going to be in our limo.”

“Limo?” I ask.

“Yes, Natalia,” she says, looking at me like I’m a child who doesn’t know anything.

“We’re taking a limo to homecoming.”

“Who is?” I ask.

“Me and Cam, you and Brody, Becca and Aiden, Teri and Rob, and I guess now *you*—” she points at Adrianna with one painted nail. “And Lancaster. It’ll pick you up at seven, and you better not be late.”

She turns and sashays down the hall. “Wow,” Adrianna says, “If I knew we were going to be stuck riding to the dance with her, I wouldn’t have been so excited about Lancaster saying yes.”

“Yeah,” I say, forcing another smile on my face. But I’m still watching Raine walk down the hall. Something about her is bothering me. Because she had no books?

Because her nails were painted a color so dark it was almost black? And then it hits me.

She was wearing the butterfly necklace. The one that Cam stole out of her locker. The one that Cam is supposed to still have.



# Chapter Four

## Campbell

When I walk away from Natalia, I'm totally in my head, not even watching where I'm going. And someone bumps into me, bumps me pretty good. Or maybe I bump into them—after all, I'm the one not paying attention.

I start to open my mouth to apologize when I look up and see who it is.

Brody grins at me. “Did you hear? All of us in one limo for the dance, bro. It's gonna be off the chain.”

I shake my head. “You sound like a shitty deodorant commercial.” Brody's smile slowly fades. “I'm getting real tired of your attitude, Cam. What's your problem, huh?

Because I'm with Natalia and you can't figure out a way to cock block?”

“Right.” I bark a laugh at him. “She's with you. Are you that fucking delusional and insane from roids that you believe that shit? / talk to her, / text her, / hang out with her, kiss her. But she's *with* you. Sure.”

His expression is like stone now, but I can see the redness in his face and a vein pulsating in his forehead. “You better watch your step, Cam. I don't want to hurt you.

But the way you're acting right now...”

I look around and gesture to the empty hallway. “There's no one around, Brody.

But maybe next time I see Natalia we can sit down and you explain why you threatened me to try and get me not to hang out with her, called her a skank. Why

your crazy sister who's supposedly in rehab—"

"Shut up about my sister," he says, taking a step forward.

"Why?" I ask. "I hate to break it to you, Brody. But your sister is hanging out with a scumbag that's following all of us and taking pictures like a psycho. So, obviously she's not the most stable chick in the world."

"You have no fucking idea what you're even—"

"You think he's screwing her?" I say, for some reason. Then I laugh and nod.

"Yeah, he probably is."

Next thing I know my ears are ringing and I'm staring up at Brody. He's standing over me with his fists clenched. I taste metal and blood.

Shit, he actually clocked me.

"I warned you, asshole," he says, looking at his hand and grimacing.

I start to get up but my legs are wobbly. "Even my chin is tougher than your fist,"

I laugh. "You hit me and break your goddamn hand, how can you ever beat me at anything?" I laugh again. "You can't. You never will."

He stares at me. "You've officially cracked up, Cam."

"Just get out of here," I say, wiping the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand. "You win, big man."

Brody starts to leave. "You'd be better off if you realized things are a lot more complicated than you think."

“Thanks for the philosophy lesson, Brody. Maybe we can continue this great talk in the limo this weekend.” I pump my fist and do a Brody imitation. “It’s gonna be off the chain, bro!”

He turns and walks away, shaking his head as he goes.

\*\*\*

When I get out to my car a few minutes later, Aiden is there waiting for me. He sees my bloody lip and his eyes grow huge. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Nothing,” I say, “Brody punched me because I got under his skin.”

We get in the car and Aiden’s still staring as I turn the ignition and pull out.

“He punched you?”

“Yup.”

“What did you say to make him do that?”

I give him a look. “What makes you so sure I said anything?”

Aiden just laughs. “Because I know you.”

“Well, maybe you should worry less about what I’m saying and more about your own big mouth.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Think about it. You’re a big boy.”

Aiden doesn't say anything for awhile. "If this is because I'm still going to the dance with Becca..."

"How can I trust you when you come up with that idea? All of us in a limo together?"

"Safety in numbers."

"You're not going, Aiden. You can't."

"Fuck that, you're not my dad."

I glare at him before looking back at the road. I've started driving too fast.

"Maybe if I was your dad you wouldn't be such a fool. Becca is going to fuck you over and it's dangerous. Dangerous for you and for me."

He stares out the window. "Maybe I don't care."

"Maybe she's got you under a spell."

"I guess that explains why I told her you know she's a witch," he says.

It's not even shocking. It should be, but it's not. I lick my lips and still taste blood. Realize that in the span of half an hour I've been screwed over by pretty much everyone I care about. I decide not to even dignify his comment with a response.

He starts talking though, maybe because he feels guilty. "Becca isn't a bad girl, not like you think," he says. "And I know you don't believe me but Becca *does* like me.

Maybe she didn't at first, but she does now. We have a connection."

I stifle a laugh of disbelief.



He keeps going. “And she figured that something was up when I tried to avoid her. So she confronted me in the library today and we had a long talk about everything.

Dude, she totally cleared it up and it’s not what we thought. They aren’t witches. Okay, maybe they fooled around with like spells and Ouija boards and voodoo, just as fun.

They tried but Becca said none of it ever worked and they stopped.”

“And you think she’s telling the truth?”

“What’s more believable, that they goofed around with stuff and it didn’t work?”

Aiden asks. “Or that they’re actual witches who have superhuman powers and can drain our energy?”

I park the car in front of the house and motion for him to get out. “Go. Get the fuck out, traitor.”

He looks at me with hurt eyes. “I’m telling you the truth, Cam.”

“Go.”

He gets out of the car, and I’m out of his driveway before he’s even taken a step.



# Chapter Five

## Natalia

My mom thinks she's going to take pictures before the Homecoming Dance. "It will be perfect," she says, "You and your friends, all lined up in front of the fireplace!"

I told her no, that under no circumstances were there going to be any pictures (especially not of my "friends"), but when I come downstairs on Friday night, she's got the digital camera out, snapping away before I can stop her.

"Mom," I say calmly. "Please put that away. I told you that there wasn't going to be any pictures."

"I know, but someday you're going to want to look back on this night and remember it. You look gorgeous, Natalia." She clutches the camera to her chest in this totally over-the-top dramatic gesture, and for a second, I think she's going to start crying.

But then she looks at the preview screen on the camera. "Huh," she says, frowning. "You blinked."

I sigh and take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. The limo should be here any minute, and this would so not be a good time to have a panic attack. Although honestly, if there was ever a reason for one, I guess this would be it.

I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror over our hall table. My hair is half up, half down, silky and shiny from the deep conditioning treatment I used earlier. My dress is still perfect, and the crimson color looks amazing against my skin. I lined my eyes with dramatic and smoky shadow and liner, but my lips are almost nude, which makes my make up look striking and subtle at the same time.

I look beautiful. Well, as close to beautiful as I'm going to get. But as I stare at my reflection, I can see in my face that something's wrong. I look drawn, nervous. My

mom must see it too, because she comes up behind me, squeezing my shoulder.

“You’re going to have a great night,” she says.

The doorbell rings, and I force a smile onto my face.

“Let me get it,” my mom says. “You should always keep your date waiting.”

I hear her opening the door, saying hi to Brody, inviting him in. I wait a few seconds, then walk from the kitchen to meet him. He looks amazing. New haircut.

Crisp black pants. Silver button-up shirt paired with a silver tie.

“You look beautiful,” he tells me.

“Thanks.”

My mom makes us stand in front of the fireplace while she takes pictures of us.

“Be safe,” she says when she kisses me.

We walk outside, and there’s the limo, black and shiny, waiting in the driveway.

“Everyone’s in there,” Brody says.

“I’m the last one you picked up?”

“Yeah.” He squeezes my hand. “It’s going to be fun.”

“Right.”

\*\*\*

Cam ignores me when I climb into the limo, not that I expected anything different. He's been ignoring me all week, ever since our fight in the hall that day. He's sitting on the other side of the car, on a long plush bench. Raine's next to him, wearing a short black dress that plunges down to her belly button. Very J-Lo. And way too much for a homecoming dance. But she's obviously too clueless to know that, or just doesn't care. Her black butterfly necklace is fastened around her neck, and I shiver.

"Hey," Adrianna says, the only one to acknowledge my presence. I say hi back, but there are a few people in between us, and so I can't really say much more. She looks nervous, sitting next to Lancaster, who's leaning over and talking to Cam and Raine.

He's clutching a sports bottle, probably filled with some kind of alcohol. He better be nice to her.

Cam's friend Aiden is next to Brody, followed by Becca, then Teri and some guy (Rob or whatever?) that I recognize from their lunch table.

Brody puts his arm around me and pulls me close. "You okay?" he whispers into my ear.

"Yes," I say, "I'm fine." My hands are clutching my purse, and I force myself to relax my grip.

"Natalia," Raine says, "I like your dress, I think Nicole Zorillo wore it last year."

"That's impossible," I lie, "It's Marc Jacobs, this year."

She doesn't quite believe it, but she's not completely sure either, so she just turns back to Cam. He hasn't looked at me once, his attention completely focused on Raine.

I'm not sure if it's because she has him under some kind of spell, or if he's just doing it to hurt me.

The limo is dark and the windows are fogged up. The partition between us and the driver is up, which means I can't really see out onto the street. It's a weird feeling, not being able to see where the car is going or who's driving it, and I feel the beginning of a panic attack starting.

"Bec Bec," Cam's friend Aiden says, "Are you excited to dance with me tonight?"

"I can't wait." She's sitting on his lap now, and she giggles and buries her face into his neck. He tries to kiss her, but she turns her head at the last second.

"Unh-uh," she slurs, like she's been sipping whatever Lancaster has in that bottle.

"That's for later, baby."

He pulls her close, his hand sliding up her leg. The smell of alcohol in the car is making my head swim a little, and I turn to Brody. "Do you have any water?" I ask.

He reaches into a little cooler that's behind our seats and pulls out a bottle. He takes the cap off and hands it to me.

"Thanks." I take a sip, but it doesn't make me feel better. I try to concentrate on my breathing, in and out, in and out, holding each inhale and exhale for the same amount of time.

"You're okay," Brody says, rubbing my back. "You're fine. Nothing bad is happening. I'm going to take care of you, okay?"

I nod and bury my face into his shoulder, closing my eyes. His hand is still rubbing my back. I keep my head buried the whole ride to school, trying to block out everyone's voices. At one point I hear Adrianna ask Brody if I'm okay, and he tells

her I'm fine, just a little carsick. I send him a silent thank you.

Once we pull into the parking lot of the lodge where the dance is being held, I get out, gulping in the fresh air, immediately starting to feel better.

Cam pushes past me on his way out of the limo, still ignoring me as he follows Raine into the building. Aiden goes by next, holding Becca's hand, and then Adrianna's next to me.

"You all right?" she asks, concern on her face.

"Yeah," I say, rolling my eyes because I don't want her to worry. "I was just getting a little carsick."

"No fun," she says, "And you didn't even have anything to drink." She leans in close to me. "I think Lancaster's a little tipsy."

"Yo, Adrienne," he yells from up ahead. "Come on. I want to dance." He swivels his hips in an exaggerated dance move.

"See you in there?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say, giving her a smile. "See you in there."

"You all right?" Brody asks when she's gone. He hands me my purse. "You left this in the limo."

"Thanks." I take it gratefully. "And I'm fine."

"You want to stay out here for a couple minutes?"

"No." I shake my head. "I'm ready."

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Listen,” he says, turning to stand in front of me. “Whatever happens tonight, I need you to trust me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying that if some shit starts to go down, you have to listen to me. Trust me. Understand that I know more about this stuff than you do. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” I nod.

He leans down then, and kisses my cheek softly. Then he takes my hand and leads me into the lodge.





# Chapter Six

## Campbell

When I was getting ready for the dance tonight, I told myself to keep my wits about me. The most important thing, I decided, was to try to keep Raine from putting me under her spell or whatever the hell it is that she does to me.

I treated it just like I would a football game. Sitting on my bed in my shirt and tie, I closed my eyes and visualized myself being calm and cool and in control, even as I pretended to have fun and get drunk at the dance.

But the moment I stepped into that limo with Raine and she got close to me, I could feel the logic and self-control slipping from my grasp. Felt my thoughts getting jumbled and weird.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get back to my normal self.

The feeling was kind of like swimming in rough surf. That happened to me once on a trip to Plum Island, where I tried to show off in front of Brody and Lancaster, seeing who could swim the furthest, and I got tired.

I still remember how no matter how hard I kicked and paddled my arms, the beach got further and further away as the tide swept me out.

Finally there was this burst of adrenaline and fear when I thought I might actually die out there. Luckily a huge wave came along and I was able to just barely drag myself back to the beach.

I smile now, remembering how thankful I was to be alive that day. I think I might have even kneeled down and kissed the sand.

"Something funny?" Raine asks, and I snap out of it, sort of.

We're just walking into the lodge where the dance is being held. There's a huge Homecoming banner hanging from the ceiling.

"Just thinking about how I almost drowned once," I tell her.

"When you looked into my eyes?" she asks, dramatically flipping her hair like some stupid shampoo commercial.

I laugh. "Exactly."

She stops and kisses me softly on the lips. It feels good. Better than it did before.

I'm not sure why, though.

Aiden yells out, "Get a room, you two!" and everyone laughs.

We stop kissing and keep walking. I almost stumble on the red carpeting at one point and Raine grabs my arm, steadying me. "You're already drunk and it's barely even started."

"This place is huge!" Aiden says, and Becca shushes him.

I can hear the dance music echoing from somewhere in the distance, but we're walking down this long, cavernous corridor with a bunch of other kids and the actual ball room isn't in sight yet.

"Why the hell did they decide to have the dance in a lodge?" I ask. "This place is fucking creepy."

Raine grabs my hand. "This is Wolden Estates, Cam. It's been in my mother's family for hundreds of years."

“Your family owns this place?”

“We own a lot of places around here,” she says. “But Wolden Estates is probably the best known. It’s totally a historical landmark.”

I stare at the large oil paintings that adorn the walls of the corridor. They’re those creepy old kinds of paintings that are portraits of unsmiling women and men and children. They all look somehow rich and aristocratic and...doomed. Like they’re all depressed and just waiting to die.

“It’s cold in here,” I say, shivering a little.

“These old buildings tend to have drafts,” Raine says, grabbing my arm. “But don’t worry, Cam, I’ll keep you warm.”

After what feels like forever we finally get to the ball room. It’s enormous – the space is so big that the music bounces off the walls and ceilings. And still somehow it feels like the music isn’t quite loud enough even though I can barely hear anyone talking when they scream in my ear.

The group that was together in the limo kind of breaks apart as Brody and Natalia head for a table, while Lancaster and Adrianna make a beeline for the punch bowl.

Teri and Rob and Becca and Aiden are all waiting for Raine to decide what she wants to do next.

She looks around and seems displeased. “Ugh, this is already totally boring.

Want to go upstairs and smoke pot?”

Everyone cheers.

I try to smile but my lips are numb and slow to react. Raine pulls me back out the

main entrance as we all head for the stairs.

\*\*\*

Raine takes us up to some kind of study, which is even weirder than the rest of the lodge. I can't remember how many twists and turns and doors we went through—not to mention stairs that we climbed—before getting there.

The room's musty and stale, yet somehow still freezing.

"Teri, open the window," Raine commands.

The study has row upon row of bookcases stuffed with books that look to be hundreds of years old. I walk over and examine a few of the cracked, weathered spines.

## **Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des Progres de L'Esprit Humain**

### **The Christian Virtuoso**

#### **Letter to a Friend**

I start to pull the Christian Virtuoso off the shelf when Raine slaps my hand.

"You can't touch those!"

"Why not?"

"They're like museum pieces," she says. "Some of those books are worth hundreds or thousands of dollars."

"Oh."

“Can we sit in these comfy leather seats?” Aiden says, pulling Becca down onto one of the brown leather couches before anyone bothers to answer him.

“Of course we can sit,” Raine says. She pulls out a little bejeweled flask from her purse and gives everyone a wicked grin. “How about a little drink before we get to the good stuff?”

Applause.

I look around at everyone, feeling drunker than I’ve ever been without even having had a sniff of booze tonight. I smile, and then a little voice shouts at me from deep inside.

*You’re under her spell.*

I laugh. I know it’s true, but somehow the whole thing is just funny now. I mean, it’s not so bad, being numb and drunk and horny, is it?

*Wake up, you’re in trouble...*

But the flask is shoved into my hands and I’m drinking from it while the others shout my name and clap. “Cam! Cam! Cam!” I drink for a few seconds and the liquid scours my throat with a burning pain.

“Ugh, what was that shit?” I ask, handing off the flask to Teri.

“That’s what we call my special Jamba Juice,” Raine tells me. She’s got a joint out and is rolling it back and forth with a dollar bill. She’s holding it over her lap and her dress has fallen back to reveal tanned skin all the way up her thigh.

She looks up and catches my gaze.

I grin. “Hey.”

“You like what you see, cowboy?”

I do my best Western drawl. “It ain’t too bad, ain’t too bad atall.”

“Good.” She sticks the end of the joint between my lips and lights it with a bejeweled lighter that matches her flask.

I take a big hit and the acrid smoke pours into my lungs. I abruptly cough it out and everyone hoots and laughs.

A few more tokes and then I pass the joint to my left.

Pretty soon the entire room is cloaked in a haze of pot smoke and the flask is being passed around counterclockwise.

Not too long after that I see Teri leading her guy out of the study and leaving just Raine and me and Aiden and Becca. Aiden and Becca are making out hardcore on the opposite couch while Raine and I pass the joint back and forth, watching them.

“This is your friend’s lucky night,” Raine says, taking a long hit.

I laugh, watching Aiden try to grope Becca’s breasts as she removes his hand and places it back on her hip.

When Raine passes the weed back to me, I notice her butterfly necklace. For a moment I get this really strange thrill of fear that shoots up my spine.

“Hey, your necklace.”

She looks at me and her expression darkens. “The one you stole?”

“How did you...I mean...didn’t you lose it?”

“No. You stole it.”

I laugh and nod. “You’re right.”

“But I got it back from you the other night. You don’t remember?”

I shake my head. “Bullshit.”

She laughs. “You opened the door for me and everything, Cam.”

“I did not.”

“How do you think I got it then?” She grasps it and runs her fingers along its smooth, shiny surface.

“Maybe that’s a copy.”

“No. There’s only one, Cam. And it wasn’t very nice of you to steal it, either.”

“Sorry.” I can’t think of anything else to say to that.

Aiden’s gone limp on the other couch.

There’s a knock on the study door.

“Who is it?” Raine says.

“Teri. And Brody’s here too.”

Raine stands up. “Tell him to leave.”

“Let me in, Raine,” Brody says from outside. His voice is muffled.



For some reason, I laugh again.

“Fine.” Raine walks and opens the door. Brody peers inside and sees what’s going on. Aiden passed out with Becca still kissing his cheeks and lips.

Me sitting on the other couch, stoned and drunk with a huge grin.

He doesn’t look altogether pleased. “What are you going to do with them?” he asks.

Raine sighs. “None of your business. You know that. The less you know the better.”

“I just need to be sure—“

“You don’t need anything. You got her. You got what you wanted, and we get what we wanted. What’s left to discuss?”

Brody glances at me again and frowns. “There are rules about this kind of thing, Raine. Laws and—”

“Please, save that shit for the girl scouts. You’re in no position to lecture me on professional ethics. Now go back to your little angel and leave us adults alone. We’ve got important work to do.”

“I’m warning you Raine. Don’t overstep. I’m serious about this.”

“Whatever. Toodles!” She motions for Teri to shut the door, which she does.

The room starts to spin a little as Raine sits back down again. She caresses my hair.

“What was all that about?” I say.

“Forget about him,” she says, waving her hand. “He’s nothing. Time for fun.”

“What kind of fun?”

Aiden begins twitching. His legs and arms. His eyes have rolled back in his head and then his entire body slumps to the side and slides off the couch.

I try to stand but my legs won’t really accommodate.

Becca gets up from the couch and steps over Aiden’s convulsing body. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is open.

“Mmmm....Camerade,” she says.

“Oh, this is going to be tasty,” Raine laughs.

I try to talk. Actually, I want to scream. But this time I’m drowning and there’s no wave to come along and wash me ashore.



# Chapter Seven

## Natalia

“Lancaster’s drunk,” Adrianna tells me, plunking herself down next to me. “Like, really drunk. Like, I think he’s in the bathroom puking kind of drunk.”

“I’m so sorry, Adrianna,” I tell her. We’re sitting at a table in the ballroom, pieces of cake in front of us. For some reason it’s a big thing at Santa Anna to have cake at every dance. This one was a huge three-tiered cake from some fancy bakery, wishing the football team good luck tomorrow in their game against Bridgewater. “It’s okay,”

she says, sighing. She takes a bite of cake, licking every bit of frosting from the fork. “I think Lancaster’s a From Afar.”

“A From Afar?”

“Yeah,” she says, “A guy that looks good from afar. Cute, on the football team, stuff like that. But once you get to know them, you find out, like, a million unattractive things about them. Things you wouldn’t have known if you’d just kept noticing them from afar.” She looks across the room to where Lancaster’s standing by the punch bowl.

“Like the fact that they spiked the punch.”

“He didn’t.”

“He did. Lame, right? I mean, how 1980s movie can you get?”

“Well, you have to give yourself some credit,” I tell her. “You asked him out.

Which is amazing.”

“True,” she says. “I *am* kind of proud of myself for that. And at least now I don’t have to waste any time pining for him.”

“Exactly,” I say. “Think about how horrible it would have been if you’d secretly lusted after him all year.”

Chelsey goes walking by, wearing a long turquoise dress, holding hands with some kid I don’t recognize. “She still mad at you?” I ask.

“Yup.” Chelsey and Adrianna are in a fight, since Adrianna was supposed to ride over to the dance tonight with Chelsey. But when Adrianna asked Lancaster to be her date, and he said yes, she decided to go in his limo. So then Chelsey got mad and said that it was ridiculous that just because Lancaster was popular that Adrianna had to go with him. And Adrianna said no, it was because he was the guy, and besides, he’d already paid for the limo. And then Chelsey said that was sexist, and Adrianna said it wasn’t, and then Chelsey told her not to talk to her ever again. Which is a little dramatic.

“Go talk to her,” I say, as I catch Chelsey sneaking looks at Adrianna out of the corner of her eye.

“You sure?” Adrianna asks. “Will you be okay by yourself for a second?”

“Of course.” I gesture to the table. “I’ll eat my cake. And Brody’s too, if he’s not back in time to stop me.”

“Thanks.”

I watch as she makes her way across the room and over to Chelsey. The two of them start to talk, Chelsey moving away a few steps away from her date. But she still looks mad. In fact, their conversation looks like it’s getting a little heated, and then Chelsey gestures to the doors of the ball room. The two of them walk outside

to continue their conversation. That can't be good. Anytime a conversation has to be moved outside, it's not on the right track.

"Don't even think about eating my cake," Brody says. He sits down next to me, and sets two glasses of punch down on the table.

"The punch is spiked," I tell him.

"Lancaster?"

"How'd you know?"

"Old trick." He smiles.

"Why does this homecoming dance seem like a prom?"

"You think this is like a prom?" he asks. "You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until the real prom."

"Even worse?"

"Way worse."

I take another bite of cake and scan the crowd, looking for Cam. Or Raine. But I don't see them. Or Becca. Or Teri. Or Aiden.

"I don't see Cam," I say, suddenly nervous. I shift on my chair, trying to get a better look at the crowd.

"Relax," Brody says. "I saw him on my way to the bathroom. Him and Aiden were on their way back to the limo."

"For what?"

“Said they had some shit they needed to talk about.”

“Was Raine with them?”

“No,” Brody says.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I relax a little. If Cam wasn't with Raine, then it's okay. Maybe him and Aiden got some information out of the Triad, maybe they were on their way back to the limo to discuss it in private. Maybe —

“This party,” Lancaster says, dropping down in the chair next to Brody, “Sucks.”

He stinks of alcohol, and there's sweat on his forehead.

“How much have you had to drink, Lancaster?” Brody asks.

“Enough,” Lancaster slurs. He reaches across the table and holds his hand out to me. “I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm your date, Lancaster.”

“I'm Natalia,” I say, opting not to take his hand. “And you're not my date.” I think about reminding him that he's Adrianna's date, but honestly, she's better off not having anything to do with him for the rest of the night. Plus she's still gone, talking to Chelsey somewhere.

“You're really drunk, Lancaster,” Brody says. He sighs and looks at me. “I should probably take him outside. If anyone catches him, he'll get suspended.”

“I'll go with you,” I say, not wanting to be left alone at the dance. Not only that, but

I'm kind of afraid to be without him.

"You sure?" Brody asks. "You don't have to come."

"Are you kidding? I welcome the chance to get out of here."

I start to follow them outside. As we walk through the lobby, Lancaster tries to moon a girl talking on her cell phone.

"Haha," Brody says, pushing him along. "Lancaster, you kidder."

"I'm not kidding," Lancaster says. "My ass is serious. Serious as a fucking HEART ATTACK!" He bellows the last part, but we're outside now, so his voice does nothing but echo into the night.

I actually don't mind his antics. It's so normal that it feels almost safe. And it's keeping my mind off Cam and Raine and all the other crazy stuff that's going on.

Our limo is right in front, parked up against the curb. I know it's our limo because we're the only ones who took a limo to the dance. Apparently Raine likes to make a big spectacle. Not that I'm surprised.

"Hey," our driver says. He's leaning up against the car, smoking a cigarette and wearing a top hat. He looks at Lancaster. "Homeboy can chill in the car, but if he gets sick, it's a hundred bucks."

"That's okay," Brody says, but the driver goes to open the car door. Great. Now it's going to be me, Brody, Cam, Aiden, and a drunk Lancaster all in the limo together.

I'm about to beg off and go back to the dance to find Adrianna, when I see it. A white butterfly, perched on the side of the limo. A chill moves up my spine.

And so when the driver opens the door, I push by Brody and peer inside. The car is



empty.

“Brody,” I say slowly. “Where are Cam and Aiden?”

“They must have gone back inside,” he says. He’s easing Lancaster into the limo now.

“Did two of the guys who were with us earlier go back into the dance?” I ask the driver.

“Nobody’s been out here since I dropped you off,” the driver says. He shrugs and tosses his cigarette onto the sidewalk, stomping it out with the heel of his shoe. He walks around to the drivers side, and slides inside.

“Brody,” I say. “The driver just said nobody’s been out here.”

He’s still distracted. He barely glances at me. “Well, maybe they never made it to the limo. I don’t know. Lan—hey.” Lancaster’s foot kicks up from inside the car and Brody steps back to avoid getting kicked.

“Brody,” I say, my voice catching. “Tell me the truth.”

He’s ignoring me though, trying to deal with Lancaster, laughing and trying to get him to stay in the limo.

White hot anger is building up inside me. Rage. Humiliation. Betrayal. It’s all coming together to form a hard knot in the pit of my stomach. “Brody, where’s Cam?”

“I already told you, I don’t know, “ he says again. He finally shuts the door and looks at me.

“Don’t lie to me, “ I say, and then it’s like something explodes. It’s coming out of

me, a wave of fury and hatred. Brody takes a step toward me, but as my gaze locks on his, he stumbles back and slams against the limo. Hard.

“What the fuck?” he says.

“Brody, “ I say again. “Where is Cam?”

“Natalia,” he says, still on the ground. “You have to leave them be.”

“What is she doing to him?” My voice sounds calm and measured, but inside, I’m screaming.

“She needs to do it,” Brody says. “She needs to do it or there will be consequences. Bad ones. A war. You’ll be hurt.”

“What is she doing to him?” And now I really am screaming. Brody tries to stand up, but the white hot fire is back, burning out of me, and he falls to the ground again.

The butterfly on the car turns black. And then it flutters up, into the night, coming to rest on my shoulder. I turn around and start to run. Back into the lodge.

I have to find Cam.

## **RUINED**

**(The Witches of Santa Anna, Book Seven)**

**by Lauren Barnholdt & Aaron Gorvine**

Copyright 2011, Lauren Barnholdt and Aaron Gorvine, all rights reserved This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental





# Chapter One

## Natalia

I'm rushing back into the lodge, my heart pounding, adrenaline coursing through my veins. Cam. He's all I can think about. I have to find him, to save him, to keep Raine from doing whatever she's doing to him. It was stupid to believe Brody, to trust him, when Cam warned me not to. I run back into the ballroom, scanning the crowd, hoping that I'll see Cam. But of course I don't.

I don't see Raine either. Or Becca. Or Aiden. I keep searching, praying, hoping I'll see someone, anyone who can help me. My eyes are looking, moving, faster and faster even as I try not to panic. At one point I think I see Derek, standing by the door in the back of the ballroom, but I blink and he's gone. I feel like I'm going crazy, that I'm losing my mind, that I might just fall apart, collapse to the floor and start crying. And then I spot Teri. She's over in a mass of bodies, jumping up and down to the music, dancing to some rhythmic pop song that's pounding through the speakers.

I fight my way through the crowd and tap her on the shoulder. She turns around, her face sweaty, her blonde hair messy from all the jumping and dancing. Her smile falters when she sees me. "Ugh," she says, "What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you," I tell her.

"Fuck you." She turns back around, but I grab her shoulder and pull her toward me, rougher than I need to. I make sure to dig my nails into the flesh of her shoulder.

"You want to talk to me," I say, concentrating my whole energy on it. "And you're going to tell me everything you know."

"I'm not telling you shit." But her voice is faltering now, her face starting to go slack, her eyes starting to look dead.

“Yes, you are.”

She starts to say no, but then she nods. I keep my hand on her shoulder, steering her out into the hallway outside of the ballroom. I push her roughly up against the wall, and stand in front of her so that she can't get away.

“Where are they?” I ask.

“Who?” Her eyes are moving back and forth, her pupils dilating like crazy, and I can tell she's trying to fight me off.

“Raine and Becca,” I say. I focus on her eyes. “Where did they take Cam?”

“Upstairs.” She bites down on her lip, scared.

“Show me.”

I keep my hand on her shoulder and follow her up the spiral staircase, into a long hallway filled with heavy mahogany doors. Teri turns right, then left, then right again.

The walls are lined with mirrors, and when I look at my reflection, I can see a flock of butterflies around my head.

Teri leads me down so many hallways and up so many stairways that I start to get nervous. I'm thinking about turning back when finally, she stops in front of a door.

It opens into some kind of library or study, an old room filled with leather couches and dusty books. The smell of marijuana hits my nose. But the room is empty.

“They were here?” I ask Teri.

She nods.

I take a step inside, my eyes falling on a jewel encrusted lighter that's sitting on one of the heavy wood tables. I pick it up, running my finger over the glittery beads. On closer inspection, I see that they're set up in a pattern. A pattern of a butterfly. I set it back down.

They were here.

But they're not anymore.

"Where did they go?" I ask.

"I don't know." She looks dazed, confused. "They took him and Aiden," she says simply, like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Becca and Raine?"

"Yes." She picks up the lighter from the table and I snatch it out of her hand. I don't know what it is, but I'm not taking any chances.

I grab her shoulders, resisting the urge to shake her. "Where are they now?"

"I told you, I don't know," she says, and shrugs.

"Tell me where they are." I'm looking in her eyes, for any sign that I might be losing my grip on her. But she's still blank, leading me to believe that she really doesn't know where they are.

"I. Don't. Know," she says. "And besides, you can't do anything about it."

"Can't do anything about what?"

“About them. Raine’s making Cam hers. Forever. And you can’t stop it.”

“You’re going to help me find them,” I say. “Okay?” She doesn’t say anything, and I shake her gently.

She nods.

We walk out of the room and into the hallway. I shut the door behind me, not wanting anyone to know we were here. “Where should we go first?” I ask Teri.

She shrugs. Her eyes look bored and empty, and her shoulders are hunched forward, making her small frame look even smaller.

I concentrate as hard as I can. “Teri,” I say, “Where would Raine and Becca have taken them?”

“I don’t know,” she says, an edge creeping into her voice this time. “Maybe a bedroom?”

We start to check, opening doors up and down the hallway. Bedrooms. Offices.

Libraries, bathrooms, rooms full of junk. Each one is empty. We keep looking, moving faster, peering into closets and bathtubs. I’m starting to get frustrated when I catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye. A flash of black. Movement.

I turn around. Derek. Behind me. In the hall. My first instinct is to panic, to run, to get away from him. And in that moment, that split second, I’m so thrown that I lose my concentration. I can feel my focus draining away, and Teri turns and starts running down the hall, back toward the spiral staircase that leads down to the dance.

“Teri!”



I yell. But she's gone.

And I'm left there, alone with Derek.

He halves the distance between us in just a few seconds, stepping out of the shadows in a black hooded sweatshirt and dark jeans. "Hello, Natalia," he says. And then he grins.



# Chapter Two

## Campbell

When I come to, I'm being dragged across the ground.

My head is still foggy, but starting to clear a little.

"He's heavy, I need to stop," I hear her say. Raine. Of course. It's always Raine.

I open my eyes just enough to see her standing at my feet, hands on her hips, breathing like she just ran the 100-yard dash.

Becca is a little ways in front of Raine, and she's dragging what looks at first like a mannequin. In the darkness and with my eyes half-closed, I can barely make it out.

"Want to switch? Aiden's way smaller. And I don't just mean his you-know-what." She laughs.

"Really? I think we can do without the sexual humor right now," Raine says.

"We need to get them to the clearing."

"I feel strong," Becca tells her. "Like I could run a marathon."

"Just keep going, I'll catch up," Raine says, and bends down, grabs my feet. She hoists my legs and I try to stay relaxed and still.

And then slowly, slowly, she starts dragging me again. I can't believe she's able to move me—I'm about two hundred pounds—but somehow she's doing it.

I can feel the wet grass as I slide through the blades. The sky above me is a canopy of bright stars and darkness. I desperately try to fight off sleep, as a wave

of exhaustion rolls over me. For an unknown time I go unconscious.

And then suddenly I'm awake again, only this time the canopy of sky has been replaced by forest and trees.

"Finally," Raine says, dropping my legs and brushing off her hands.

Becca appears to be tying Aiden's hands behind his back as he stirs and moans.

"We could use a fire."

"No probs." Raine glances at a spot in the clearing we're in and some twigs and leaves burst into flames. She walks over and starts arranging some stones around the fire in order to contain it.

A regular fucking cub scout, this girl.

I stay totally still as Raine keeps looking at me from nearby.

"I'm not an idiot, you know," she calls out.

Becca looks up. "I don't think you're an idiot."

"Not you. Him. I know you're awake." The firelight casts shadows on her admittedly beautiful face, making her look devilish. She grins, enhancing the effect even more. "Cammy Cam Cammy!"

"What are you doing, Raine?" I say, giving up the act. I try to sit up and find that I can't. My legs and arms won't move, they're like lumps of clay. My head lifts a fraction off the ground, but that's it.

"Oh, Cam, don't worry. Soon everything's going to be better." She comes toward me now and I feel a thrill of fear in my stomach.

Why the hell can't I move?

"Listen, Raine. We need to talk. Like, seriously, seriously talk. This is crazy."

"What's crazy is that you actually like that skanky bitch Natalia. You do realize that she's fucking Brody, right?"

"I don't care about that," I lie. "What matters to me is that you're about to do something you can't take back."

"Oh? What's that?"

"This is kidnapping. You guys could go to jail for this."

The girls both laugh.

Aiden picks his head up and looks blearily at the scene, as if waking from a coma.

"Hey...hey...what's..."

"Oh, shut up." Becca kicks him in the shoulder, knocking him onto his side.

Then she grabs a rope and begins tying his legs. "I've had to listen to about enough of your annoying voice to last me a lifetime. I even let you stick your nasty tongue down my throat. Ugh."

"Raine. Please. Don't do this."

She comes over and kneels down next to me. Her eyes are black. "Honey, just try to be quiet and don't struggle too much. It will make the whole thing so much easier if you just chill."

“I’m never going to really love you.”

Her expression turns stony. “Actually, after tonight, you will. In fact, you’ll pretty much do whatever I tell you.”

I turn my head and watch as Becca drags Aiden over to a tree, tossing the rope over a long branch and grabbing it. Then she starts hoisting him until he actually hangs in midair, a few feet off the ground. His arms are outstretched above his head.

“Why are you doing...Becca...?” he asks, still obviously confused.

“Aiden, man—you gotta wake up!” I say, trying to yell. But my own voice is weak and barely rises above a conversational whisper.

“Cam honey, leave Aiden alone.”

“Wake up!” I tell him again, ignoring Raine.

“I’m not going to tell you again.”

When I call to him the next time, Raine nods at Becca, who picks up a long, steely knife from nearby and makes a cut across Aiden’s cheek. He groans softly.

“What the fuck are you crazy bitches doing?” I say.

Raine takes my chin in her hand and turns it so I’m staring into her eyes. “That’s a warning. If you make trouble, scream, whatever—you’re only going to make it more painful for Aiden. You don’t want that, now, do you, hon?”

“Fuck you.”

She smiles, leans in, and kisses me.

At first my whole being reacts against her, and I want to spit in her face, fight her, something. But within seconds, I can feel my thoughts jumbling up and there's a softness that moves in and covers me.

I've never experienced such bliss, such beautiful smells and colors and sounds.

I hear a symphony playing the most amazing music, I see bursts of blues and oranges and yellows, like starflowers, blossoming in my eyes. Everything bad recedes into the distance and everything good is happening here and now.

I smile, wanting her to kiss me again.





# Chapter Three

## Natalia

As Derek comes toward me, I start to run. I can hear his footsteps behind me, getting closer, but I still keep running. Faster. Faster. Faster. Through the halls, down the staircases, past the endless number of doors. I look at myself in the mirrors lining the wall, seeing the white butterflies flying with me, and for some reason, their presence comforts me.

I start to move even faster, but he's keeping up with me no problem, and I'm getting lost, tangled up in the maze of the lodge, when I hear Derek speak behind me. "I know where he is, you know."

I hesitate. I stop, turn around. He keeps walking toward me. "Don't come closer," I say, focusing my energy on him so that he'll do what I want.

He holds his hands up. "I won't," he says. But it's like that day in the car with Brody, where I was trying to control him but couldn't. Which means Derek's not moving because he doesn't want to, not because I'm making him.

"What do you want?" I demand.

"I don't want anything."

"Bullshit," I say, turning back around. "You want something. Either that or you don't really know where he is."

He's still standing in the same spot, and he stays there, even when I start to take a few steps away from him. "I'm not the enemy, Natalia. I've always wanted you and Cam to be together."

I whirl back around. "Is that why you were acting so psycho? Taking all those

pictures of us? Because you wanted us to be together? How stupid do you think I am, Derek?"

He hesitates, then finally takes a step toward me. But he puts his hands up in front of him, a gesture of surrender. "You don't have to believe me," he says. "But if you have any chance of saving Cam, you're running out of time. So you don't have much choice."

I think about it. He's right. If I know Raine, she's getting right down to whatever it is she's doing. And Derek's also right that I don't have a choice but to listen to him.

I'm on my own, and I have no one to turn to, no one to trust.

"Why won't my mind control work on you?" I ask him. "Who are you?"

"Someone who has a stake in you and Cam being together," he says. "Now do you want to help him?"

"Yes," I say.

"Then listen carefully."

\*\*\*

He leads me to the back of the lodge, to a sliding glass door that opens to a cherry-colored deck with a wooden staircase that leads four stories down to the backyard.

A few feet away are a row of tall pine trees, and beyond that, a thick patch of woods.

"Go down the to the ground," he says. "And follow the path beyond the trees."

I look out into the night, where a thick fog is starting to build, rolling in from the sky and enveloping the deck. I want to tell Derek no, that there's no way in hell I'm going out there, that it seems dangerous. I want to turn around, to find Adrianna, to go home, to stay away from Cam and Brody and Raine and everyone. To try and forget that this whole crazy thing ever happened.

But I know that I can't. Me and Cam... we have a connection. And I have to save him.

"You'll come to a clearing," Derek says. "That's where they are. Watch for a fire."

"Aren't you coming?" I'm scared of him, but suddenly, I don't want to be alone.

"No," he says, "You have to do it on your own."

He turns around, and disappears back through the sliding glass door. My heart pounding, I start down the stairs.

\*\*\*

The staircase seems kind of rickety, but I'm not sure if it's just my imagination, or if it's really not that stable. I walk down to the yard quickly but carefully, relieved when the last wooden plank gives way to the softness of the grass.

From the front of the building, I can hear the sounds of the dance, kids talking, a car starting, someone laughing, the deep throb of the beat of the music.

I start moving forward before I can lose my nerve, toward the trees. There's a path, just like Derek promised, and I head down it, walking fast. The high heels I'm wearing sink into the soft ground, and the hem of my dress is already torn. I force myself to keep going, to keep putting one foot in front of the other even though my brain is screaming for my feet to turn around.

The path seems to go on forever, twisting and turning. After a while it becomes narrows and for a moment, I think I've lost it, but then it reappears and slowly starts to get wider.

And then, I hear voices. Laughter. Raine.

I force myself to slow down, hoping to be able to take stock of the situation before they hear me coming. I take smaller steps, and pull in deep breaths of air to try and relax, because my heart is pounding in my ears.

Some fog slides over an opening between the trees, and through the break I can see a clearing. There's a fire, its flames licking up toward the sky and casting light over the woods.

I kneel down on the grass, squinting through some bushes to try and see what's going on. It looks like Cam's on the ground, and Raine and Becca are gathering some branches. Aiden is strung up on a tree, his hands tied together with a rope.

I wonder if I can take on Raine and Becca, wonder if my power is strong enough to stop both of them. I debate if it's better to plan a sneak attack, or if I should try to figure out a way to alert Cam that I'm here. I wonder if he's too out of it to even help.

But before I can decide what to do, the fire cracks, sending sparks up toward the branches of the trees. I jump.

And then Brody steps into the clearing.



# Chapter Four

## Campbell

I start to think that maybe I'm dreaming.

Brody is standing in the clearing arguing with Raine and Becca while my best friend is hog-tied and hanging from a tree branch.

"You can't do this, Raine," Brody says, looking at me and then Aiden.

She laughs. "I can and I will. What's your problem, anyway? You knew what was going to happen and you never tried to stand in my way before."

"Because I thought you were going to be reasonable."

"Reasonable? Why should I be reasonable?" she says, poking a stick into the fire and making the flames rise higher.

Somehow I can move a little, maybe because Raine's attention has been diverted.

But I still feel completely exhausted. I start to sit up. My hands and feet are tied, but at least I'm not strung up like Aiden.

Raine glances at me and frowns. "Settle down, Cam. Relax." She points at me and a new wave of warmth pulses through my entire body. I slide back onto the ground.

My eyes close. I can hear them talking, but their voices sound faint and I find I don't much care what they're saying.

"Look, you can take Cam and use him if you need to," Brody says. "But whatever you're thinking of doing with Aiden—"

“You know exactly what we’re going to do. Stop being such a prude,” Becca says. “Why do you even care? As long as things go according to plan, this is none of your business.”

“No killing. I’m sorry but I won’t let you do it.”

“Blood needs to be spilled.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s blood that ties the final bond.”

“That’s crazy. As it is, you’ve got him sufficiently under your influence. Don’t get greedy.”

“I’ll be greedy if I want. I’m starting to lose patience with you, Brody.”

My eyes open as the warmth and sense of calm fades. Whatever Raine is doing to me, it feels good but it doesn’t last all that long. I blink a few times. Shake my head to clear out the cobwebs.

“I’m the one who’s losing patience,” Brody says, his hands clenched. “And you don’t have a clue what I’m capable of.”

“You?” Raine steps toward him and suddenly the flames in the fire shoot toward the sky, almost like a fireball. “What you’re capable of?” She makes an effortless, swatting gesture and Brody goes spinning into a tree and falls into a heap.

Becca laughs. “Oh, my God. I love it! I totally wish people at school could see what you just did to Mr. Football Stud.”

Brody isn’t moving.

Raine looks at me and then Becca. “Hurry. I think we’re running out of time.

Get the knife.”

Becca does as she’s told. The blade glints in the dim firelight as she holds it aloft.

Her face is a mask of excitement—as if she’s really looking forward to killing Aiden.

“When I recite the words, cut his throat. It must be precise and you have to kill him with a single stroke,” Raine says, her voice cold. She comes nearer to me, as if she has to be close to me in order to carry out some other part of the plan.

I wonder what she intends to do. Somehow melt my brain—make me into a zombie? I think of Natalia, and tell myself that no matter what Raine does to me tonight, I will never forget that it’s Natalia I love.

I’ve never even admitted to myself that I love her until just this moment. And now I might lose her.

“No,” I say, but my voice is low. I try to stand, but fall to my side.

The wind picks up and the trees begin swaying and rustling. The fire starts to dim but then Raine looks at it and the flames rise again.

She starts to speak, to say something in a foreign language. Nothing I’ve ever heard before.

Becca raises the blade higher and prepares to cut my friend’s throat.

I try to yell.

“Stop!” a voice screams. I turn my head and see Natalia running into the clearing.



Raine's face turns into a snarl. "You stupidbitch. You just went too fucking far." She makes the swatting motion.

Natalia stumbles backward, but nothing like what happened to Brody. She seems to be able to resist what Raine's trying to do to her.

Raine starts walking toward her. "Becca, help me take care of this little slut."

"Gladly." Becca and Raine move toward her at once.

I want Natalia to just run—get out of here and don't look back. There's no way she can take them both on at once.

But Natalia stands her ground, a look of determination and defiance on her face.

Natalia looks to Becca first. "You want to hurt Raine," she says slowly and confidently. Becca halts, almost in mid-step. "You hate Raine," Natalia finishes.

Raine reaches Natalia just as she's finished saying this, grabs her shoulder and swings at her with her free hand, hitting her clean on the jaw.

Natalia's head rocks back from the blow, but she keeps her balance. "Becca, you have to attack Raine now," Natalia says, as Raine loads up to throw another punch.

Becca practically tackles Raine in that instant, and the two begin struggling against each other.

Raine is shrieking at her. "What are you doing, you idiot? Get off of me!"

Natalia watches them for a second, almost as if she's in shock that she was actually able to make them fight each other.

Becca throws Raine to the ground and jumps on her, flailing wildly, grabbing Raine's hair, scratching and clawing her.

After a few moments of this, Natalia runs to me and begins untying my hands.

"Are you okay, Cam?" she asks breathlessly.

I try to talk but my voice is just a whisper. "They put some kind of...I don't know. A spell on me or something. I'm not much good to anyone at the moment."

"Just stay still and let me get you free."

Raine finally throws Becca across the clearing. Becca stands up.

"Whore!" Raine yells. "I should have known you were too weak for this, Bec Bec. Go to sleep." Raine takes a moment to gather herself, then snaps her fingers.

Becca sits down, her eyes promptly closing. She reminds me of a battery-powered toy that's been suddenly turned off.

Nat almost has my hands entirely untied now. Raine sneers as she sees this.

"What are you going to do with him once you untie him? He can't even move."

Natalia stands. "Get out of here Raine. It's over. The cops will be told all about your little plan to kill Aiden and you're going to get kicked out of school and thrown in jail. You lost. Now get lost."

Raine puts her hands on her hips. "Oh, you told me. And with such a catchy phrase too. 'You lost now get lost.'" She barks a laugh. "You just don't get it, Natalia.

You think you're a player but you're really just a little gnat, a little fly that I've been

too busy to squash. But not anymore.”

She rushes toward her.



# Chapter Five

## Natalia

Raine comes toward me. She looks extremely focused for someone who was just about to kill someone. I had no trouble controlling Becca, but when I look at Raine and try to control her, I can already tell it's not going to work.

It's like our powers are bouncing off each other, canceling each other out, and it's hard to even speak. Our gazes are locked together, and I can't look away. I can feel it coming off of her, how badly she wants Cam.

She must feel it too, the fact that we can't control each other, that we must be evenly matched. Because her eyes narrow and she says to me, "Looks like we're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way."

I realize what she's talking about a second before she's given me credit for, and I reach out and slap her across the face. Hard. Raine looks shocked, and she brings her hand slowly up to her face, feeling the place that I hit her. There's an angry red hand print already starting to show.

"I thought you were going to squash me," I say, taunting her just because I can.

"The only one around here who seems to be getting squashed is you." Her legs are totally exposed from the way her dress is cut and I grab her around the waist, scratching and clawing and finally slamming her to the ground.

We're tangled up, the two of us, and I'm on top of her, pulling her hair. She's smaller than me, though, and a lot more flexible. I can't get a good grip on her, and we wrestle around on the ground for a while, neither one of us able to take over. Shapes and objects go swirling by -- trees, ground, sky, a blur of colors and shapes that make no sense. I feel dirt under my cheek, and a rock scrapes against my forehead.

I'm on top, then she is, over and over, again and again.

"Give up!" she yells, "You're not going to win, Natalia. If you stop now, I'll go easy on you."

I ignore her, not wanting to waste my strength by yelling. Finally I'm able to pin her to the ground, my weight on top of her. I slap her again, then decide I'll probably have to punch her. But before I can, she wiggles out from under me, her hands around my wrists, pushing me down so that she's on top of me.

She grabs my neck with her fingers, her hands making a death grip around my throat. I try to breathe, but I can't, and I start to panic, clawing at her, trying to throw her off of me by kicking my legs and squirming around. But it's not working.

Her grip tightens and my vision starts to blur. I can see Cam, on the ground, trying to get up and help me, but he's too weak. And then, just as I'm about to fade out, something catches the firelight.

The necklace. Raine's butterfly necklace, tied around her neck. I reach up, not knowing if it's going to work, and grab the delicate chain in my hands. I yank it as hard as I can, and the piece of jewelry breaks and falls off her neck.

The move startles her, and her concentration fades a little as the charm goes sliding off the chain and falls onto the ground. Her grip loosens, just the tiniest bit, but it's enough for me to throw her off me and then roll onto my knees. My breath is coming in ragged gasps.

I look up and she's already coming back at me, a snarl on her face, her eyes flashing. I take every last ounce of strength I have, and then I look at her.

"Raine," I say. "You are going to turn around and leave me alone. You're afraid of me, Raine. You always have been."

For a second, she looks confused, but she keeps coming at me. “Raine,” I say, and her feet slow down. “Turn around. And get out of here.”

She stops, her face going slack. “No,” she says, but it’s faint. Somehow, without her necklace, I’m more powerful than she is. And if I had mine, I probably could have kicked her ass right from the start.

“GO!” I scream it, and Raine stops. Her body sways back and forth in the moonlight, and for a second, I think she’s going to faint. But then she’s turning, running away, faster and faster into the woods.

I rush over to Cam. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“Sort of,” he says. He’s flat on his back now, exhausted from the strain of trying to stand up to help me.

“Can you stand up?”

He tries, his legs weak. He almost buckles, but is able to stay up by holding onto a tree. “I think I’m getting better,” he says, “But we have to get Aiden down.”

I look over to where Aiden’s strung up. He looks like he’s trying to open his eyes, but they roll back into his head. He moans.

“I think I’m going to have to just untie the rope,” I say. “I don’t think I’m strong enough to get him down, and we don’t have anything to cut it with. He’s going to hit the ground pretty hard.”

Cam nods. “Do it.”

I untie the rope that’s attached to the tree trunk, and Aiden does hit the ground hard. “Ooof,” he says when he falls. I rush over to him. He opens his eyes slowly.

“Hey,” I say, “Are you okay?”

“I think so,” he says.

“Move your arms and legs,” I instruct, mostly because that’s what I’ve seen on medical shows and read in books. He does it.

“Natalia,” Cam says, his voice sounding panicked. “Brody. He’s gone.”

I turn to look. Becca’s still there, on the ground, sleeping. But Cam’s right.

Brody’s gone. I sit down on the ground, leaning back against a tree. I close my eyes, still trying to catch my breath. “It’s okay,” I say, “It doesn’t matter. It’s over now.”





# Chapter Six

## Campbell

It's morning, and Natalia's next to me, sleeping in my bed.

It takes me a moment to remember what even happened last night. It all feels like some kind of weird fever dream. Being taken to that study, my energy fading, waking up in the clearing. The fighting. Brody going down. Raine being sent scurrying off with her tail between her legs.

Afterwards, Nat and Aiden and I called a taxi and got home before the dance had even ended. Aiden was quiet, didn't say much as I held Nat close.

But it's all over now, I think, trying to shake the memories and move into the present. The present is good enough.

Weak light is streaming through the blinds in my window. I breathe a sigh of relief, and move closer to Nat. Kiss the back of her neck. Smell the lingering but faint scent of her perfume.

She's breathing evenly and softly into the pillow. Looks peaceful.

After all the drama and the madness since she started at Santa Anna, it finally feels like things have come full circle. We're together and I've got her in my arms.

I hold her like that for a while, remembering the way we kissed before falling asleep last night.

The things we said, things I'd wanted to tell her but hadn't been able to. But now we can be together. What Raine thinks, or Becca, or Teri, or Brody. None of it matters anymore.

I slowly move away from Nat and over to my night stand to grab my cell.

She stirs a bit, then seems to settle again.

I call Aid. He answers on the third ring. “Just calling to give me a big I told you so?” he says. “If so, don’t bother.”

“You know that’s not it,” I reply, glancing over at Nat and creeping out of the bedroom so I don’t disturb her. The rest of the house is empty since my mom’s at a work conference this weekend in Florida.

“So then I suppose you want to know if I’m okay.”

I close the door gently behind me. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’m okay, aside from the cut on my cheek, the bruises on my wrists, and the general humiliation of being trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey by the girl I thought was going to take my virginity.”

“Sorry about that.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Cam. I was the idiot.”

“At least you’re alive Aiden.”

“True.” There’s silence for a bit.

“You think they’ll be back at school on Monday like nothing ever happened?”

“Probably.”

“Even Raine?” he asks.

I think of Raine, running off into the woods like a cat scared of its own shadow. I grimace as I remember her kiss. The way it made me feel. Probably the way heroin makes a junkie feel.

“Hopefully Raine takes a long hiatus,” I tell him. “The way she left, I doubt she’ll be back anytime soon.” But saying the words doesn’t make me any more convinced that they’re true.

“And Brody?”

His question lingers as I think about Brody and how he tried to stop what was happening. I still can’t tell whose side the guy is on. Whichever side, it certainly wasn’t mine and Nat’s. “I don’t know what happened to him. He took off.”

“Are you going to talk to him?”

I sigh loudly. “Let’s not get into it right now. I just want to enjoy the fact that we’re alive and sane and not cooking over some fire pit.”

Aiden laughs, but it sounds kind of hollow. Can’t blame him, really.

“Yeah. Well, I should go. Mom’s cooking breakfast, told her I’d be down.”

“Glad you’re okay, Aid.”

“Thanks, Cam. Seriously. Thanks for caring.”

And then the line clicks. I close my phone, feeling somehow sad. Aiden’s not the same goofy, naïve kid he was just a few days ago. He’s changed. He’ll be fine, though.

He’s going to have breakfast with his family and hopefully, eventually, forget all about last night.

Breakfast. That sounds good right about now. Maybe Nat will like waking up to breakfast in bed.

I pad out to the kitchen and grab the frying pan, set it on the stove and start the heat. Then I get out some fixings; eggs, bacon, milk, toast. I grab a bowl and begin mixing the eggs with a dash of milk, using a fork to stir.

It makes me happy to think of Natalia realizing that I made it for her. This feels right, I decide. This is how it was all supposed to go.

“Hey, sexy,” she says.

I turn, startled, and Natalia’s standing there, running a hand through her hair and yawning. She’s in a long t-shirt and nothing else, which is a fairly awesome sight.

“Hey.” I hold up the bowl. “You like your eggs scrambled? Cuz that’s the only way I know how to make ‘em.”

She grins. “That’s the only way I want to eat them.”

“Perfect.”

She comes over and leans against the island, her chin resting on her fist, smiling as I continue to cook. “You’re cute when you act domestic.”

“Thanks. It’s all for you, Nat.” I look up at her when I say it. “Seriously.”

She blushes and turns to the coffee maker. “Any chance you’re brewing something in there?”

“Nah, we’re out of coffee. Sorry.”

“Maybe I’ll run to the store and get us some?”

I can’t say exactly why, but this innocuous idea makes me strangely nervous. I don’t want her out of my sight. Now that we’re finally together I want to stay together for as long as humanly possible. But I realize how silly it would sound to tell her not to go. So I nod. “Sure. You can even take my car.”

“Ooooooh.” She feigns surprise. “Now I know this is serious.”

I laugh, grab the keys off the ring on the wall and toss them. She catches them one-handed.

“Shit, a woman who can do magic and make a catch like Derek Jeter? That’s something special.” But I realize that I brought up magic and it’s the last thing Natalia probably wants to think about right now.

Her smile fades a little. “You know me,” she says, “I’m multi-talented.”

“Breakfast will be ready when you get back,” I say. “Just…”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t stay away too long.”

“I won’t.” She smiles and I kiss her goodbye.

When the door shuts, I feel like I want to run after her and tell her to stay. But I don’t.



# Chapter Seven

## Natalia

There's a Starbucks not that far from Cam's house, and I decide to ditch the grocery store idea and head there instead. Starbucks coffee, readymade, with a flavor syrup, sounds better than actually having to make it. Plus who knows if Cam even has cream and sugar in the house.

The Starbucks plaza is busy, and I have to circle the parking lot twice before finding an empty spot. I reach over and grab my purse from the passenger seat, and as I do, catch sight of myself in the rearview mirror. There are dark circles under my eyes, a bruise on the side of my neck.

But I'm alive. And I'm with Cam.

I get out and head into the Starbucks, wondering how life can still just be going on like nothing happened. People are milling around, ordering their morning coffee, reading the newspaper, chatting at the tables like everything's normal.

I join the line, suddenly ravenous. I order two warm croissants to go with our bacon and eggs, and two tall, steaming paper cups of coffee with shots of vanilla. I stand at the end of the counter, waiting for the croissants to be ready, when someone taps me on the shoulder.

I turn around. Brody. He looks a mess. He's wearing the same clothes he had on last night, his shirt untucked and his tie loosened. His face is drawn, and there are dark circles under his eyes.

"Brody," I say, keeping my tone measured. "It's enough. It's over."

"I need to talk to you," he says.



“I’m done talking.”

The Starbucks clerk slides the brown paper bag containing my pastries across the counter.

“Are those for you and Cam?” Brody asks.

“That’s none of your business.”

I walk out the door and into the parking lot. Brody follows me. I think about calling Cam, but then I realize there’s nothing he can do. I have his car.

“If you don’t stop following me,” I tell Brody, “I’m going to call the police.”

“And tell them what? That you ran into me in Starbucks?”

“No, that you followed me to Starbucks and that you wouldn’t leave me alone even when I asked you to.” I’m trying to balance the coffees and the bag as I walk, and it’s slowing down my pace, because I don’t want the hot coffee to splatter out and burn me.

“Natalia,” Brody says, “It’s not over.”

I don’t answer him. We’re at Cam’s car now, and I open the door and set the coffees and the croissants down on the backseat.

“Jesus Christ, Natalia,” Brody says, “You couldn’t just fucking listen to me, could you?”

“Why would I listen to you?” I ask. “You told me to stay away from Cam, that I could trust you, and then you betrayed me. I’m not sure exactly who you are Brody, or what you’re after, but I know it’s bad.”

“What I’m after,” he says, “Is peace.”

“Really?” I laugh, then open the drivers side door. “You could have fooled me.”

“You don’t know what you started,” Brody says, and there’s something gritty and desperate in his voice that makes me stop and turn around. “You and Cam together, it’s... that’s not how it’s supposed to be.”

“Who are you to tell me how my life is supposed to be?”

“Look, it’s not about that. I came here to tell you that if you stay with Cam, horrible things are going to happen. This is much bigger than you realize.”

“Brody,” I say, “I’m with Cam. Accept it.”

“There’s going to be a war, Natalia. A bad one.”

“That’s not true,” I say, but as the words come out of my mouth, a little part of me is already starting to doubt them.

.

“There are people out there who don’t want you to be with Cam, Natalia. And they make Raine look like a kindergartner.”

“You’re a liar.”

“No,” he says, sadly, shaking his head. “I wish I were lying. But I’m not.”

He turns and walks away, back toward his car. I watch him go, watch him getting smaller and smaller until he reaches his truck. I stay there, standing by Cam’s car, watching Brody as he pulls out of the parking lot and onto the street.

A cold sliver of fear snakes its way up my spine. I'm starting to think I was wrong.  
This isn't over. Not by a long shot....

**END SEASON ONE...**

**Look for Season Two of The Witches of Santa**

**Anna, coming soon!**