

BY THE POND



SHE REALIZED THAT THERE was a gaping hole where her heart used to be, and it had been replaced with a series of painful, selfish, vengeful parasites that made her careless and single-minded. Or at least that's the way she viewed herself.

She thought it best to distract Anthony with his favorite meal that night. And as she slaved over the stove, stirring a piping hot brew aimlessly, she, herself, was distracted by her plaguing dreams and her visit to the field that Brandon had taken her to that frosty night all those years ago. And as much as she knew, the dragonfly pendant had been meticulously tossed in the trash a few months ago...or at least that's what Asha told Anthony.

Anthony startled her when he entered the apartment, calling out her name. He placed a bottle of wine on the kitchen counter and kissed her cheek.

“Baby, it's been a long day,” he told her. “But your cooking will make it alright...”

The Reina girl that she'd seen Brandon with was only remotely pretty, so there had to have been more to her that appealed to Brandon. Maybe it was her unmatched perkiness, or the fact that they had the same hair color. Or maybe it was the fact that she seemed fun and sweet in the appropriate way, and that she didn't give him as many problems as Natalie did.

Maybe he was actually falling for her...and maybe it was time to actually stop thinking about him...

Anthony had disappeared into her bedroom. She'd given him a drawer and enough space for his clothes in the closet. It was only a matter of time before he returned in his sweats and lounged on the couch till she got done cooking. She'd forgotten that his favorite television show came on that night – there were also a number of other things she'd forgotten about him.

But he took longer than expected, giving Natalie plenty of time to let her thoughts drift away from her coolly. And it was only a matter of time before she burned the stew that Anthony loved so much.

She turned off the burner, and just as turned around and called out his name, he stood there in the kitchen behind her. She hadn't heard him come.

"God, you scared me," she said, placing the pot down.

"Natalie..."

"What?"

She took notice of his face, as if he were teetering on the edge of delirium. She couldn't decide if he was going to slap her or choke her. She instinctively took a step back anyway.

"I thought you said the dragonfly pendant was Asha's?"

Natalie felt her heart stop, and she attempted to steady herself. She was never good at lying; especially when her emotions were being squeezed to their breaking point. She chose to remain silent. That only seemed to aggravate him further.

"You're just not going to say anything...? You're just going to stand there and not answer me?"

"What do you expect me to say? Shouldn't you be asking Asha that question?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head violently. "I'm asking the right person..."

"Where is this even coming from...?"

"You know exactly where this is coming from," he said, his voice getting louder. He then held up the picture that Natalie had neglected to hide in a more secure spot. The close-up shot featured her and Brandon with their arms around each other, she, with her head rested on his shoulder. She couldn't remember when and where the picture was taken – but it had become one of her favorites.

He paused for a moment; each breath he took was ridged and painfully audible. "I want the truth, Natalie...I want the truth now."

She turned her eyes away and started to walk past him. She had no idea where she wanted to go or what she wanted to do. She only mumbled, "Don't do this right now, Anthony..."

"No, we are," he demanded. He grabbed her arm aggressively and pulled her back around. She shrieked with discomfort.

He visibly quieted and calmed himself, releasing her arm swiftly. "Isn't this you," he began quietly.

She nodded.

"Isn't that the same pendant he said was Asha's?"

She nodded again.

He released a long, heavy breath. “Just tell me, Natalie...tell me the truth...what does the ‘T’ stand for...?”

Her lips began to quiver and tears brimmed her eyes. “He used to call me Tallie...”

Anthony nodded. “So the note was for you...?”

She nodded slowly.

“And the pendant...?”

“It was my twentieth birthday...not Asha’s...”

A tear slid down her cheek. Recollection then crossed his face.

“And the girl that Scotty was talking about...the girl that he was so hung up on...?”

Natalie wiped the tear away and Anthony retraced a couple of steps. “It was me...”

“How long were you together...?”

“A year...”

“Why did you break up?”

“He proposed to me, but I said no...so he broke it off with me...”

Anthony paused and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, Ant...”

Suddenly, he raised it again, ripped the picture to shreds, and threw the shards all around the room.

“Sorry? You’ve been lying to my face for weeks about this, Natalie,” he said. “As far as I know you’ve been carrying on an affair behind my back, and I’ve been stupid enough to think that we had something special and that you were being faithful...”

She wanted to assure him that she was being faithful, just so he could stop being mad at her. But she could no longer perpetuate a lie; she knew that Anthony could no longer trust her as fully as he’d done in the past.

He took a deep breath. “You should have just told me from the beginning,” he continued quietly.

“You wouldn’t have understood,” she replied, breathlessly.

“Maybe not,” he responded honestly, bouncing his shoulders up and down once. “But I would’ve tried really hard...now I can spend the rest of my days obsessing over the things he did right that I’m doing wrong now...all because you wouldn’t tell me. Is he the reason why you won’t move in with me...?”

She wanted to reply honestly and say yes.

Ant, we'll never be as close as he and I were, she wanted to tell him, but I've sincerely tried to make it different between us...it's just so hard to open up to you the way I did him...he knows all of my secrets...my dreams, my wants, my needs...he knows me better than anyone else...and it's not fair...I've tried so hard to forget he ever existed...but he won't leave my mind...

She only nodded childishly, watching him throw his hands up angrily and turn his back on her.

"Just tell me the truth, Nat," he began quietly, bracing himself up against the kitchen counter. "Are you still in love with him? Is this why you kept your relationship secret from me?"

She cried harder and she felt pathetic. But the simplicity in Anthony's essence was reading like a flashing yellow light at a four-way junction, showing her what her life could be if she didn't choose wisely. He was beautiful, apt, brilliant and secure, and she could envision the comfortable life that they would lead: she would be a successful pediatrician alongside her husband, and they would live in a brick masterpiece in Buckhead, and she would sink into a life of complete normalcy, and she would hate herself for retreating behind the lines of the boundaries she thought she was rid of. She would love Dr. Jones, but her heart would never be fully satisfied, like only drinking half a cup of sweet tea and leaving the rest out in the sun to evaporate. And then she reminded herself of what being in love really felt like; she could no longer be afraid to embrace it or suppress it or deny it. It would never be fair to Anthony; he would never really know her true love. She had already established a considerably stronger connection with someone years ago; and she was now willing to step out on a ledge and wait for the mound of rocks to go crumbling beneath her.

Anthony turned to face her again and she knew that her moment of truth was fast approaching. She took a deep breath and braced herself, picturing the pools of Caribbean blue eyes in her head, smelling the coconut shampoo, seeing the rusted soccer cleats in the front yard beneath a UGA flag, remembering the salty breeze on Jekyll Island, envisioning the late-night conversations that lasted till breakfast at the Pancake House down the street, hearing the laughter as the result of dozens of inside jokes and random events that couldn't be experienced with any other person.

“I love you, Anthony,” she whispered, piercing his befuddled gaze with her own. “But I can’t lie to you anymore. And I can’t...I can’t lie to myself anymore. I need to leave. Goodbye...”

It was viciously plain, blunt and simple, but that’s just the person she was. She only hoped that she didn’t regret her rationality in making her final, heartfelt decision. She would attempt to be comfortable living in the moment; and for that particular moment, she knew that she wasn’t in love with Anthony Jones.

She gathered her thoughts on the drive over. She loosened and tightened her grip on the wheel, making sure that she kept her eyes focused on the road. She didn’t want her nerves to get the best of her. She veered onto the familiar street, dampened and misty, and she could feel her entrails flip a dozen times. The green Ford Explorer was present, but the baby blue BMW wasn’t. She was confident that this would be easy. She knew that Brandon still loved her as much as she loved him. She took a deep breath and exited the car.

She traversed up the driveway, kicking aside the pair of soccer shoes, smiling to herself. She could think of no better joy than to crawl in his bed beside him and show him just how much she loved him. He would smile and tell her that he always knew she’d be back, so he washed his sheets twice for her, just so they smelled just right.

She had a little giggle about that too.

She knocked on the door slowly and methodically, as she prepared herself for her new future. She heard footsteps approach and quickly finger-combed her hair and ruffled her clothes, momentarily forgetting that Brandon had seen her at her very worst and didn’t care. That was the love and comfort that she wanted.

But Reina appeared on the other side, leaning against the frame of the open doorway in nothing more than the blue buttoned down shirt that she bought him for his birthday. Natalie only saw her hazel wolf-eyes, her full coral lips, and her long silhouette of undulating russet hair.