

# *Moving On*

## Excerpt

He pulled into the driveway of the house on Trent road and was relieved when she didn't see the baby blue BMW parked outside. Maybe the mysterious brunette had been a disheartening delusion she'd concocted in her head so that she wouldn't have to get out of the car...or maybe she was just as real as Asha had said. Scotty proceeded to get out of the car, but Asha remained seated. She innately grabbed her friend's hand, startling her.

"Ash, you promised we'd played spades when we got back, remember?" Scotty reminded her. Asha hesitated for a moment, then caught wind of what he was talking about. She hated when they treated her as though she were a fool.

"I'm coming too," Natalie offered as she started to open her door.

"No," Asha shot back, surprising her, "You should go home...Anthony will be there in no time...Scotty will drive me back when we're done playing..."

She wanted to protest more, but she didn't feel like causing more drama than necessary. This was one of hundreds of times that she'd been in Brandon's car, and the ten minute ride home wouldn't kill her – she just hoped it was the last time she had to do so.

She lingered in the backseat, but realized that Brandon hadn't moved, even after Scotty and Asha had gone into the house. And she caught him eyeing her from the rearview mirror.

"What?"

"I'm not a chauffeur, Natalie," he said bluntly. "Get your ass in the front seat."

She purposely hesitated, until his eyes widened. The rain grew more menacing, and a crackle of thunder resonated the length of the sky. She climbed in the passenger seat beside him, and trembled when the thunder snarled again.

He chuckled hollowly, as he backed out of the driveway. "I remember when you used to be so scared of thunderstorms. The first time you screamed, you were so embarrassed. Each time after that you begged me to hold you until it was over..."

"Yes, and then you proceeded to yell at me for waking you up, and then you'd roll back

over and go back to sleep...I remember that perfectly..."

She watched as he pursed his lips, and murmured, "I've grown quite used to you leaving me hanging, though...considering it a second skin..."

"That's all you ever did, Tallie," he heckled, shaking his head. "You criticized me; you pointed out the negative parts of our relationship...you never focused on how great it really was...how close we really were..."

"Don't make me the bad guy in this scenario, Brandon," she replied.

"How can I not? Nothing I ever did was good enough for you. Loving you wasn't enough...always being there wasn't enough..."

She shook her head violently. She could feel the muscles in her throat begin to constrict.

"Don't make me the enemy," she replied, quietly. Suddenly, she was winded.

"I wasn't the one that left," she continued. "I wasn't the one who gave up on our relationship...if you were having problems with me you should've told me...you should've told me like you always told me...don't you dare sit there and say it's my fault that you left. You left me in the middle of the night, while I was passed out drunk. If you cared about me at all, you would've talked to me about it. We would've worked it out. We would have been fine today. It wasn't over for me..."

She realized that his agitation was progressing; he was accelerating much more than he should have on that dark, narrow road.

"And now I'm over it...now I've moved on...and you can't stand it...you can't stand it at all..."

"If you've moved on, what was that on the beach in Clearwater, Tal, huh? Why did we kiss? Why did you come and meet me at all?"

She couldn't think of an answer that could satisfy him; because she didn't know why she did it. At that moment, she only went off of what she felt – seeing Brandon in the cascading silhouette, smelling his cologne, reveling in the magnitude of his strength, as the self-conscious, anxious side of herself drifted into the sea.

She rolled her eyes closed. That moment was surreal, and should only exist on a plane where her imaginative side would always long for Brandon to set her burdensome mind free.

"I don't know," she babbled earnestly. "I don't know what I feel anymore...I'm hollow, I'm misplaced...you're all that I...you're all that I ever wanted to feel...you're all

that I ever needed...”

He pulled into a space in front of her apartment building and killed the engine. The rain knocked zealously against the windows.

“Tal,” he whispered. “You can’t keep punishing me...I’ve told you countless times how sorry I am...I made a fool out of you and out of myself...and you’re trying to alienate yourself from me...and it’s killing me, baby...it’s killing me that I can’t...I can’t...”

His voice trailed off, and he directed his eyes toward his window.

“I’m the one that’s been punished, Brandy,” she whispered. She could feel the tears climb her throat now. “I’ll never know what it feels like to love again. Because I’ll never be able to love any man as much as I loved you. No feeling will ever come close. And you’ll always haunt me, and as long as I’m with Anthony it’ll never be fair to him. I’ll never be capable of giving him my whole self...because [she began to stammer through her words as the first tear fell]...because you will always have all of me [she pauses for a moment to let the initial cry roll through her, and then she continues]. I didn’t know how to love, but I did the best I could. And I wanted to give you everything of me...my mind, my heart, my soul, my body...and you couldn’t wait for me...”

They sit in silence for a few moments, and Natalie wipes the tears from her eyes.

Brandon avoids her eyes.

“I’d thought about it for weeks,” she whispered, sniffing gently. “I wanted it to be a surprise [she begins to laugh]. But I couldn’t decide if I wanted to tell you or if I would just pounce on you and take it from there...”

“What are you talking about, Natalie?”

“I was ready that night, Brandy,” she whispered, the sob, lingering in her voice. “I was ready to kiss my virginity goodbye that night. I was so...I was so in love with you, Brandy...I’d never felt something so real and tangible in my life...and I was ready to love you in every possible way I could...you’d waited so long for me and you deserved me...you never pressured me...you never...damn it...”

“I didn’t know, Tal...”

“You just had to up the ante, didn’t you? You couldn’t take it a step at a time, could you?”

She then shook her head vigorously, sloppily wiping the remainder of her tears away.

“Well, it’s done with now...it’s over...I’m over it...I have to go...”

“Let me walk you up...”

“No...”

“It’s after midnight...”

“I’ve gone almost two years without you...I think I can last twenty seconds...”

And she stormed out of the car.

. . .

Natalie furiously raced up the stairs to the third floor and fumbled for her keys. The rain on her face muddled the tear drops, sitting complacently on her cheeks.

She entered the dark, quiet apartment and turned her back to the door. She desperately attempted to catch her breath as the thunder clapped against the windows. But her mind had trapped her body in a bizarre way, and had constricted its basic functions. And she could only dawdle in the shadows, as the carvings in the door evanesced with her taut back.

And then there was a quiet knock on the door seconds later, startling her, numbing the disquieting calm she’d previously felt mantle her. She turned around unhurriedly and gingerly turned the knob. Brandon stood behind it, his head lowered, drenched, sloppily pressed into the doorjamb. Weakness enthralled his eyes.

She felt her insides dissolve.

“Brandy...don’t...just go...please...I can’t fight you anymore...”

But as he lunged at her and grabbed her face, she didn’t stop him. She was numb to consequence and thought; she could only sense and feel and breathe Brandon as he fervently pressed his lips into hers and hiked her up, hooking her legs around his narrow waist.

He kicked the door closed behind him, and pressed her back against the corridor wall as the thunder clapped again, as he ravenously claimed her thighs with his hands, as he pushed his pelvis into the space between her knees. She pulled her wet chignon loose, and buried her fingers in his nebulous hair, pulling and pinching and caressing.

And she parted from him, as her stringy hair dangled in her face. She pinched at his cheek, tilting it upward, studying him, eyeing him gravely.

“Tell me that you love me,” she murmured, moving her lips close to his.

“God, I love you, baby,” he whispered distraughtly in reply.

“Then make love to me, please...”

He hiked her up once more, and carried her down that corridor. His eyes never left her face. She melted like putty in his custody. He kicked open her bedroom door, and dropped her on the soft mattress. He lifted her legs up and removed her flip-flops, one by one. And he dropped them to the floor, and he individualized each of her ten toes, kissing them as if each one of them mattered in their own special way. She giggled a little.

The lids of his eyes were heavy, and he often licked his lips as his eyes traveled the length of her body.

He returned her legs and reached at the hem of his t-shirt, pulling it over his head swiftly.

Every part of her body trembled, but everything part of it felt right. She chose not to think about tomorrow or hearing from Anthony or seeing what the real world would feel like again. She only wanted Brandon to make her feel whole again.

He tugged at his belt and loosened it easily, and she watched as his jeans dropped to the floor quickly. She then stood to her feet and pushed her romper down her body, kicking it off as it settled on the floor. Brandon was smiling down at her as the tips of her fingers traced the lines in his pectoral muscles, his abs, stalling on the strip of black curly hair attached to his abdomen. He sucked in his breath as he grabbed her chin and kissed her again, heavier and deeper this time, gracefully lowering down on her back. They both crawl toward the headboard and lay flat, and he settles easily between her. Her nerves are low and he makes her feel comfortable. She hooks her arms around his neck, and he smiles down at her again. Her delicate fingers crawl down his sides and begin to push his boxers downward as his lips find a gentle curve in her neck.

The sound of her cellular phone ring scares her initially but she chooses to ignore it. When it rings again, Brandon grows distracted and rolls off of her with frustration, pounding his fists into the mattress.

“It’s him,” he mumbles through clenched teeth. She slides off the bed and goes into the living room to answer it, shutting the door behind her.

“Yes?”

“Babe, are you awake?”

“Barely...”

“I’m done earlier than I thought. The surgery was a success. There were no fatalities.”

She always loved hearing Anthony get excited about saving lives. It made him seem

more human in a way.

“That’s good, darling...”

“I won’t disturb you tonight. I just wanted to tell you goodnight. How about I pick you up for breakfast tomorrow morning?”

“That sounds good...”

“Ok, goodnight, Natalie, I love you...”

“I love you too, Ant...”

She replaces her phone and turns around, eager to return to the bedroom and continue. But Brandon is looming in the eerie shadow, fully dressed. He appears weakened in some way, and she can’t shake the feeling she gets just by looking at him.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m leaving,” he sighs. “I can’t do this. I can’t be that guy...”

“What guy?”

“He’ll always know you better than me...he’ll always have the upper hand, because he’s spent time with your family, he’s seen where you come from. You two will always share something biological that I’ll never be able to understand or compete with. I think deep down, you were always waiting for that person you could take home to your family, who you wouldn’t be ashamed of. And even if you don’t agree with me now, you’ll always know that you made the right choice by being with him instead of me, because you’re constantly seeking comfort. You’ll eventually have sex with him, and you’ll eventually marry him, and I always be the guy you kept secret from everyone. I’ll always come in second place. And I’ll never be able to deal with not being with you the right way. You’ll sleep with me tonight, and you’ll run back to him tomorrow and that’ll be the end of us. I’d never hide you; I’d never feel ashamed of you. I loved you just that much...”

She feels the anger swell up in her again and she refuses to let it subside as he walks past her, towards the door.

“Brandon David Greene, if you leave here...this will be the last time I forgive you...”

She begins to tear up and she’s sure that he can see it clearly. But he turns the knob and walks out anyway...

After meeting Anthony for a quick breakfast the following morning, she returned to her apartment to find Asha sitting on the couch waiting for her.

She patted the space next to her gently.

“I take it you’re just getting in,” Natalie suspected, placing her bottom next to her friend’s. She didn’t get much sleep the night before, and the coffee at breakfast didn’t help either. She could think of nothing more than crawling in her bed and going back to sleep in an attempt to forget yesterday.

“Yes, I left right as Brandon was pulling into the driveway this morning,” she replied, smiling. “I figured I’d give you guys plenty of time to work things out. Scotty was skeptical but I knew all along that Brandon wouldn’t come right back from dropping you off. It’s not like him.”

“Apparently he went elsewhere to ‘work things out’ after he left here...he didn’t spend the night...”

“Well what the hell happened then?”

“Do I really have to talk about it?” Natalie groaned, laying the length of the couch with exasperation.

“Yes, it’s better if you do,” Asha reminded her. “You can’t keep these things bottled up inside of you forever...”

Natalie shook her head and paused before she spoke. “We had it out in the car not too long after we left the house...”

“Yea, and...?”

“And he tried to blame me for him leaving,” she replied slowly. “And I told him...I told him that I’d never love anyone as much as I loved him...”

“Aw, that’s sweet...”

Natalie kicked her lightly.

“And I told him that I wanted to give him my virginity the night that he left me...and that I’ve essentially been screwed up ever since...”

“And that was it?”

“No...he wanted to walk me upstairs, but I refused him, and I told him that I didn’t need him. But he followed me upstairs anyway...”

“That’s my Brandon...” Asha jeered.

“And I told him to leave...of course he didn’t listen...and he proceeded to kiss me...”

“Go on, go on...”

“I got so excited that I forgot about how angry I was at him...I just wanted him...because I knew that he wanted me just as much...do I really have to finish...?”

“Yes...go on, please...”

“And I begged him to...I begged him to...oh my God this is embarrassing...”

“Begged him to what, Nat?”

“I literally begged him to make love to me...and we started to...we got so hot and heavy and we were almost at the point of penetration...I wasn't nervous, I was so comfortable...and he looked so happy...and then...then my phone rings and it's Anthony...I leave the bedroom to answer it and when I get done, he's standing in the living room with his clothes on, saying that he can't do it. Saying that he refuses to come in second place...and then he leaves...”

“Wow...you should call him...”

“He probably doesn't want anything to do with me...and I told him that if he left I wouldn't forgive him again...we're done, Ash...we're really done...”

The following week, she took a double shift at the hospital and came home late. She told Anthony to stay at his place that night; she needed just a tinge of space. She'd stopped by the store on the way home and grabbed another couple of bottles of wine. She chose the grocery store nearest to Trent road; his truck was parked outside and so was the baby blue BMW. She sped off and returned home swiftly. She was alone again. Asha had gone out of town to visit her family for the weekend, and she decided to take a bath. She poured a glass of wine and sunk into the tub, leaving the bottle beside it. Her body is still but her mind is alive, and she obsessively mulls over a series of scenarios in her head:

Maybe she's a distant cousin, visiting for the summer...maybe she's a coworker that's helping him out on a major project...maybe she's with Scotty...and he's given her the key...maybe it's just sex...maybe it's not real...maybe he doesn't care about her at all...

She's gone through her fourth glass of wine, and her skin is severely pruned. And for reasons unknown to her, she began to sob, and she can feel it in every inch of her body. She placed the glass down, climbed out of the tub, and headed into her bedroom, wrapping a towel around her as she reached for her phone. She returned, stumbling into the room, slumping down beside the bathtub. She dialed a series of numbers, but only heard a series of droning rings and then voicemail...

She cried harder then into the receiver, and murmured his name over and over again, beating her head with the palm of her hand.

“I was stupid,” she said. “I was so stupid...I’m being stupid now...I still love you...I still love you...I really do...I...I always will...just come back...just come back, please...”

. . .

But she heard nothing else from him for days, and she realized that she’d yet to admit that it was over to herself, even if she chanted it aloud for the entire world to hear. She stopped making spontaneous stops by the house on Trent road. She had sufficiently embarrassed herself.

But Anthony seemed completely oblivious to the changes that were going on with her. He only talked about how great his job was, and how he’d gotten in real well with the administration. She was glad that he’d put the proposal of moving in together on the back-burner for the time being.

She was distracted enough at work to the point where the nurses questioned her daily. She couldn’t for the life of her, come up with a better answer that would make her seem less affected. She was zombie, walking in the place of a person who once used to have every facet of herself together. Now what had she become?

She and Anthony were in her bedroom watching a movie when they heard a peculiar knock on the door. It was well past eleven, and while she had to get up in the morning to take on a full day of research in the hospital library, he had to work a full day, then catch a flight to Charleston for a pediatric conference.

“I wonder who that could be?” she asked, sitting up.

“Stay here,” he told her. “I’ll go see...”

She watched Anthony disappear into the living room, but she couldn’t hear a thing. She prayed that it wasn’t a crazed lunatic who had nothing better to do than to terrorize young unsuspecting people. But he returned a few moments later, shutting the door behind him, climbing into bed.

“Who was that?”

He looked confused, but clarity illuminated his face quickly thereafter. “It was that Brandon guy...he said that Asha forgot something at his house the other night, and he thought he would return it.”

“Really...?”

“Yea, it was a strange exchange,” he continued. “He seemed really put off by the fact that I opened the door. And I think he may have been a little drunk...”

Natalie took a deep breath. “What did Asha leave?”

“Some kind of dragonfly necklace,” he replied. “Apparently it’s been over there for quite some time and he got up enough courage to finally bring it over. He said that she’d know what to do with it...”

“Strange...”

“I’d say so,” he sighed. “I just left it on the kitchen counter. I think he might have a thing for Asha...”