

ED AND NATALIE NAKED IN SCHOOL
PART ONE
MONDAY

CHAPTER ONE
ED

Yeah, I suppose I knew it was coming. And, when I got called down to the office that Monday morning, I knew exactly what it was about.

The Program.

Hey, I'd seen friends go through it—I'd seen them have a good time with it. Two friends even got True Love out of it. (Cool for them, though not something I'm interested in.) And I knew I'd have fun with it. So, I didn't mind at all.

I'm Ed Bauer. Junior at Westport High School. Charmer, raconteur, man-about-town, all-World third baseman, and all-around nice guy. All that, and I'm cute, too. My friend Lily—she's my best friend Mike's girlfriend, and the best high school pitcher I've ever seen, guy or girl—calls me a pussyhound. Hey, I don't **have** to hound. I just sit back and let 'em fall in my lap. Whee, lookit dat! So, now I was going to be strutting my awesome Edliness all over Westport in der buff. Somebody hold the girls back, we don't want a stampede.

Well, no, not really. I'm average-looking, and I don't know if I'd really be considered charming. I **do** think I'm a nice guy, and I **can** play third base, and I **do** get girls. However, the reason I get girls is pretty simple—I'm funny. That's one thing I **will** claim—being funny. Hey, remember "Singing In The Rain"? Only the greatest film ever made. I worship Gene Kelly. I learned to play third base by watching him dance. Seriously—it's all in the footwork. Anyway, back to "Singing," Donald O'Connor had it right. "Make 'em Laugh". It never fails. I meet a girl, and in ten minutes I've got them laughing so hard they can't breathe—and in twenty minutes, they're trying to undo my pants. Funny is sexy. I learned that early. It's a hell of a gift to have.

And I'd need my sense of humor, if I was going to be naked all week. I'm kind of skinny, and I'm tall. I look "gawky"—I'm **not**, because of the whole third base thing, but I look that way—and moreso naked. Plus, I'm not exactly a giant between the legs. Hey, it works, and I know how to use it—but it ain't gonna make anyone go "whoa!" That's fine, I'll joke about anything. Is that a thimble in my pocket or am I happy to see you?

Anyhow, I didn't think The Program would be a bad gig. I knew that they tried to pair up people who didn't really know each other—you know, learning new things—so maybe I'd meet a new chick. That's always cool.

However, those hopes were dashed when I walked into Mr. Tillman's office.

"Hello, sir, you ordered the Naked Third Baseman?" I said after walking in.

“Come in, Ed,” Mr. Tilling chuckled. “You obviously figured it out.”

“Hey, the only reason you call someone down here first thing in the morning is either The Program, or that they’ve been a bad boy. Now, I’m **always** a bad boy, but you’ve never called me down here. So, I figured, you know—two plus two equals three point six nine eight. Approximately. For varying values of two.”

“Is that how you figure your batting average?” he asked bemusedly.

“Nah. I count homers as four hits. I went from .238 to .446 in a hurry. As Charlie Brown once said to Linus, ‘Tell your statistics to shut up.’”

Mr. Tilling was laughing. I can even make the principal laugh. “Well, anyhow, you got it right. You’re in The Program. Say hello to your partner.”

I turned around and saw her, huddled pitifully on the chair, looking like she’d just found out her grandmother died.

Oh, shit. Natalie Weinberg.

Thus endeth any kind of extracurricular activities with **my** partner this week.

Don’t get me wrong, I’ve got nothing against Natalie Weinberg. I don’t know her that well. And that’s the point, **nobody** knows her that well. If you looked up “wallflower” in the dictionary, there she is. She’s so shy, if she tried to tell you that your hair was on fire, you’d be consumed by flames before she got the word “your” out of her mouth. She’s in four of my classes this year and I have no idea what her voice sounds like.

And she looked **so** scared. It was pitiful.

“Hey, Nat,” I said to her, sitting down next to her. She managed to give me a small smile. I took a look at her. **Shit**, this was going to be traumatic. She was wearing what she usually wore—a long skirt that almost hit the floor, and a baggy long-sleeve blouse that was practically buttoned up to her nose. It was a suit of armor. I mean, it was 70 degrees out! And now she’d have to remove the suit of armor.

Ah, well, I could see what this week was going to be like. Good Ol’ Ed shields traumatized naked wallflower. Ah, well. I **am** a nice guy.

“I’m really not supposed to be here, Mr. Tilling,” she said. Well, now I knew what her voice sounded like. It was nice—light and airy—though painfully soft. “I’m supposed to be on the exempt list.”

“Your mother called me three weeks ago and insisted you get selected,” Mr. Tilling told her.

She almost started crying. “That bitch,” she hissed under her breath. “And I don’t have any say in this?” she asked Mr. Tilling.

“I’m sorry, Natalie, but you don’t. It’s parental discretion. Now, it’s time for you two to strip.”

“Stand back, everybody stand back,” I joked, standing up. Then I proceeded to take off my clothes while humming the “Stripper’s Theme.” I threw ‘em all at Mr. Tilling. “Bag those, James,” I joked to him. “Now, is this the most impressive specimen of manliness you’ve ever seen, or what?” I asked, while making mock Mr. America poses with my nonexistent muscles.

Natalie smiled a bit. Hey, it even works on wallflowers. To a degree.

“Your turn,” Mr. Tilling told Natalie.

The smile vanished in an awful hurry, and she really did look like she was going to cry. Her fingers hovered above the buttons on her blouse for a good minute. “I can’t do this, I just **can’t** do this!” she finally sobbed.

“Hey, sure you can,” I told her, sitting down next to her. “Hey, all kidding aside, if I can parade this scrawny body around school, you can do it. And at least you don’t have to go out like this and play third base.” I looked at Mr. Tilling. “I’m telling Lily Woodard to pitch outside all day tomorrow. No inside changeups to right-handed batters. All I need is line drives raising welts.” He chuckled, and I turned back to Natalie. “You **can** do this. I’m not saying it’s easy. But you can do it.”

“OK,” she sighed, and went to work on her blouse. The buttons came slowly undone, and then the blouse came off. She reached around and undid her bra. Then the skirt. Then the panties. It took forever, but she did it. She ended up huddled in the corner on the chair, almost trying to shield herself. Mr. Tilling told her to stand up. Reluctantly, she did.

Oh my **Christ!**

Standing before me was the most **incredible** body I’d ever seen. Look, Natalie had a very pretty face. She was a blue-eyed blonde with a flawless complexion and adorable features. But now, as I looked at **all** of her, I was dumbfounded. Huge, firm tits, tapering down to a wasp-like waist, and out to a nice set of hips and a firm yet voluptuous ass. Her legs were long and firm. Shit, even her **arms** were perfect. I couldn’t **believe** she had been hiding **this** under her suit of armor. Shit, it was all I could do not to drool. This girl was going to be followed around by every guy in the school.

And that’s when it hit me. This **petrified** girl was about to become **the** center of attention. Damn. It almost would’ve been easier if she’d been ugly. She was obviously loathing walking around naked—and she was going to be **noticed**. This was going to be hell week for her; I could see it coming. And the **last** thing she needs, Bauer you idiot, is

for **you** to be standing there ogling her like a 12-year-old that just saw his first copy of Playboy.

I put my tongue back in my mouth.

But she was looking at me, and I felt I had to say **something**. So—in a very casual, friendly, non-ogling tone of voice, I said, “You’re absolutely gorgeous, you know that, right?” She looked at me in complete, utter shock.

Oh, help. This was the most incredible girl I’d ever seen, she had **no** clue how gorgeous she was, and she was petrified.

Why in **hell** did her mother put her in The Program?

I thought back to a friend of mine, Amanda Frazier. Amanda had gone through the program at the beginning of the year. Now, when Amanda first started the program, she was shy—as far as guys went—and fairly sexually repressed. But, the thing was, she **wasn’t** shy in general—in fact she was Miss Congeniality. So she came to terms with being naked, tried to keep her chin high and the smile on her face while doing it—and, in the process, opened up to an incredible degree. She also fell in love with her partner, Jared, which helped. And I’m talking “I don’t care if they’re only sixteen, where’s the wedding invitation” love.

Natalie wasn’t trying to keep her head held high—she was trying to roll herself into a ball and hide under Mr. Tilling’s desk. And her partner—that’d be me—doesn’t do love. All I could offer was friendship. And, watching her misery, I didn’t know if that was going to be enough.

“OK, guys, time to hit the hallways,” Mr. Tilling said. Natalie visibly cringed.

I smiled at her, and said, “Come on. You’ll be all right.” We got to the outer door of the office, and I said, “I’ll go first. You just follow behind.” She nodded, and I swung the door open, jumped out in front of the gathered crowd, and yelled, “Naked third baseman on the loose! Hide the women and children! Naked third baseman on the loose!” My cronies were there, of course, laughing. I thought being my lunatic self would divert some attention off of Natalie. Stupid, Ed, stupid. She slipped out of the door behind me, and I heard a collective gasp from every guy in the hall.

Mike and Lily were there. “Somebody’s number got called!” Lily teased.

“You just make sure there’s no line drives hit at the third baseman’s naked hiney, Pedro,” I grinned.

“Hey. Natalie Weinberg, huh? Wow. Who knew? She’s stunning,” Mike said.

“She’s stunning, she has no idea how stunning she is, and she’s absolutely terror-stricken,” I told them.

“Not a good combination,” Mike agreed.

I tried to get Natalie’s attention, but she was surrounded by guys. She looked like she wanted to die as they touched her. Then, something strange happened. She was standing, crouched a little, arms tight at her sides—like she was trying to pull herself in—until someone stuck a finger in her pussy. When that happened, she stood ramrod straight, arms at her sides, legs spread apart a bit. In other words, she clearly let him do it with no protest. The frightening part was her face. Her eyes were practically glassed over. And, though the guy diddling her was being gentle and obviously trying to make her feel good, there was **no** reaction. Just a steely glare. She was obviously getting no pleasure from the act. After a minute, he withdrew her hand, she slumped herself together again, and tried to get out of the crowd.

“Pal, there’s something seriously wrong there,” Mike said astutely.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I told him. “Natalie! Come on,” I pulled her out of the crowd. “Our first classes are close, I’ll walk you there.” I did, arm around her, as she miserably shuffled down the hall. I delivered her to her first class and said, “See you in Accounting,” which was both of our second period class. Then I went to my class.

Depressed, if you want to know the truth. I had counted on a good Program week. Now, it looked like I had been buddied up with someone who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown over it. I suppose I could just ignore her and go on my merry naked way.

Yeah, **sure** I could. That’s not me, it’s just not me. I can’t pass a wounded animal without trying to help it. I was just going to ignore this terrified girl—who, don’t forget, I had been **assigned** to buddy up with? Not my style.

So, I had to try to help her get through this. **How** was the question.

CHAPTER TWO

NATALIE

You ever want to commit murder? I mean, **really** want to? If I had had a gun and my mother in front of me, I don’t know if I would have been able to hold myself back.

I’m Natalie Weinberg, I’m almost seventeen years old, I’m naked, and I’m a mess. A complete mess. I have no friends, I have no one to talk to, I have no life—and I have the mother from hell. And now I had to show my body off to everyone in the school.

When I ever got called down to the office, I figured it was something else. I thought I was on the opt-out list for The Program. When I ever found out, I almost died.

And they paired me up with Ed Bauer! Ed’s one of the nicest guys in school—I know that—but he’s also notorious for fucking anything that moves. Although he was nice this morning. Telling me I was gorgeous was nice. Of course, that was probably just a line.

I don't think I'm gorgeous. I don't like my body. My boobs are too big, my ass is too big, I'm a 'dumb blonde'—I'm like a Barbie Doll come to life. It doesn't help that my mother **treats** me like one. "You got a body, you'd better use it, because that's all you've got." I've heard that since I was twelve. My mother got knocked up by some asshole at seventeen. Why she kept me—or even had me—escapes my comprehension. She must've had some sort of maternal instinct flash when she was pregnant. Trust me, she hasn't had much of one since then. Abortion is pretty nonexistent nowadays, due to the effectiveness and availability of all types of birth control—but it was available back then. Of course, decently effective birth control was available back then, too. My mother says she was pressured by her parents to not have an abortion—they were into that whole religious "right to life" movement back then. How people think that a seventeen-year-old who was too stupid and irresponsible to carry a condom in her purse was equipped to raise a child is beyond me.

Westport's a nice town, but it has a small "bad side." That's where we live, in a rathole apartment. All my mother wants is out, and she's gone through more guys than I can name looking for a way out. Of course, when you work as a cocktail waitress in a dive, you don't exactly meet a high-caliber class of guys. So, now all her hopes of getting out are on me. If she had her way, she'd just whore me out to the highest bidder, and come along for the ride. A year or so ago, she took to arranging "dates" for me. She fixed me up with guys—older guys—and made it clear that, if a guy showed you a good time, you were obligated to "repay" him. I had my virginity taken by a thirty-year-old stockbroker. I was fifteen at the time. This happened twice more. The fourth time—with a guy who was completely disgusting—I revolted. I ran out of the car and ran home. My mother was furious—but stopped arranging "dates" for me.

This must be Plan B. Make me parade my grotesque imitation of a Barbie-doll body around school naked, and have some rich guy "claim" me. Lovely, huh?

I know nobody at school. I have no friends. I'm scared to try to make them. I can't bring people home to my apartment—and I can't go over someone else's house without getting a third degree. I go to the **mall**, I get grilled. So I go from a school where I'm nobody to a home where I'm a set of tits to be used as a meal ticket. And people think I'm shy. Which I am to a point. What I more am is scared—scared people will use me, scared people will find out about all the bile I have stored in my gut, scared that I'd have to explain my life.

Suicide? You bet your ass it's crossed my mind.

However, contrary to what my mother thinks, I **do** have other things going for me. I'm smart. **Really** smart. Mother never cares to read my report card—if she did, she'd see a whole list of A's. So, I **have** a way out. College scholarship. My grades are good enough to get one. Then I'm getting out of here, without selling my body, and my mother's not invited. A year and a half—that's all I have to wait it out.

Of course, this week looked to be longer than the rest of the year and a half combined.

First period was miserable. I just wanted to crawl under a rock. Second period was better, only because Ed was there. I'll say this for him—his antics take attention away from me. I'll say another thing for him—he's funny. Genuinely funny. He actually made me laugh. I went from looking for razor blades to laughing out loud. That's a pretty neat thing to be able to do to someone.

The next two periods were torturous.

I kept getting fingered in the hall. I hated every minute of it. I hate being touched. Everyone just wants something from you—a touch here, a fondle there. It was excruciating. Like I said, I'm afraid of being used. And I was being used left and right. And all I could do was sit there and take it.

Anyhow, I got to lunch. And got my customary table in the corner, away from everyone, where nobody could find me. I was wrong about that. Ed found me.

"Hey," he said, sitting down. "How's the morning going?"

"Hellish," I admitted.

"You need to loosen up," he said.

"Yeah. Right," I snorted.

"Is it really that bad?" he said.

"Yeah, it's really that bad," I told him.

"Why?"

Now, **there** was a question. A question I didn't want to answer. I barely knew this guy. "Because," was all I said.

"Hey, Natalie, I'm trying to help."

"Why?" I asked him back. "Because you were **assigned** to be my buddy by Mr. Tilling? Because you're obligated? Don't bother."

Damn. He really looked hurt at that. Now you see why I don't talk to anyone.

"I was assigned, that's true. But I'm trying to help because that's what I do. I hate seeing anyone in as much pain as you are."

"Sure you do," I snorted. "You hate seeing someone in pain because you'd rather see them getting in bed with you."

You see? I just can't shut up. He looked like I had slapped him.

“That was a low blow,” he said in a low, serious voice. “You don’t know me well enough to say something like that. But, suit yourself. If you think that’s all I want from you, suit yourself. I won’t bother you anymore,” and he started to get up.

Dammit. Dammit all to hell. This was the guy who had me smiling in Mr. Tilling’s office, and laughing in accounting. Now he looked like he either wanted to cry, or strangle me.

“Ed, wait,” I said as he stepped away from the table. “I’m sorry. You’re right. That was uncalled for.”

“Apology accepted,” he said curtly, and started to walk away again.

“Ed,” I said, “please don’t go.” He reluctantly turned around and sat back down across from me. “I’m sorry. I feel like I’m on the verge of a nervous breakdown—and I’m taking it out on you. This is why I don’t talk to anyone around here.”

“Do you feel like this often?” he asked.

“Often enough. Having to parade my body around isn’t helping.”

“Look,” he said, with a deep breath, “I have to tell you this. Your body is magnificent. You’re one of the most gorgeous girls I’ve ever seen in my life—maybe **the** most. You should be parading it around with pride.”

I sighed. “Why should I do that? It’s just a body. And now it’s all people will see. Look, that’s all **you** see. I’m not saying that to be nasty or accusative, but that’s all you see.”

“That’s because I don’t know you. **Nobody** around here knows you.” He smiled slightly. “And I’m not saying this to be nasty or accusative, but that’s not **our** fault.”

“You mean you think if I had revealed more of myself to other people, it wouldn’t be so bad being **forced** to reveal my body?”

“Got it in one,” he said.

I thought about that for a minute. If I had a friend, would this be easier? “Look,” he continued, “I’m naked, too. And I **don’t** have your kind of body. I’m getting teased. I’m also getting groped. The thing is, I’m getting teased and groped by **pals**. When your best friend’s girlfriend walks by you in the hall, grabs your dick, and starts singing ‘Make it grow’ to the tune of ‘Let it Snow’, you’d better be comfortable with the person that’s doing it. Lily and I are great friends. It’s easier.”

I laughed at that, and then said, “You have a point.” I smiled at him. “You’re right, nobody knows a thing about me. Did you know I’m ranked seventh in the class?”

“Really?” he said. “I didn’t know that. I hold my own, but nowhere near seventh.”

"I like to draw," I continued.

"I play a mean third base," he said.

"My favorite food is Chinese."

"Mine's the seafood special at The Mariner. Chinese is a close second."

I took a breath. "My mother is the evil bitch from hell."

"My parents are very cool," he laughed. "It's my older sister that's the evil bitch from hell. She's at Syracuse University right now, which is a good place for her."

I giggled. "My favorite color is blue."

"Mine's purple."

"School colors?" I asked. He nodded. "My favorite number is 2."

"Mine's eighteen. The number I wear on my back when I'm playing ball. I got it assigned in Little League and it's always been lucky."

"I have no siblings, I don't have a father, and I like cats but don't have any."

"Besides the sister, I also have an older brother, my father is great, and we have two dogs. I like cats, too, but the dogs don't." He grinned at me.

"OK," I thought, "If asked for one word to describe me, most people would say quiet."

"For me, I think it would be funny."

"I'd figured that out," I giggled. "Besides drawing, the thing I like to do best is go to the park downtown on a nice day and curl up on the grass with a book."

"Besides baseball, the thing I like to do best is hang out with my pals."

"My idol is Katharine Hepburn."

"An old film buff?" he said. I nodded. "Yeah! My idol is Gene Kelly."

"Really? Do you like Hepburn?"

"But of course," he said. "How about Bogart?"

"Bogart makes me weak in the knees," I admitted.

“For me, **that** is Julie Andrews—especially in The Sound Of Music. I had a crush on her when I was **three**,” he laughed.

“Nah, Christopher Plummer. He was **gorgeous** in that movie,” I said.

“Well, if I swung that way, I might agree with you,” he laughed.

“Uh-huh,” I giggled. “Knowing your bent towards humor, you must have some favorite comedians,” I said.

“Yeah, and a lot of them are old-time, too. Groucho. I worship Groucho. Abbott and Costello. I also love Steve Martin, George Carlin. For really outrageous stuff, the late Bill Hicks. There’s a guy who died too young—he was brilliant.”

“How about comic actors?” I asked.

“It’s funny, my ultimate collection of comedic actors is actually in a TV show—the old Dick Van Dyke show. Van Dyke, Mary Tyler Moore, Morey Amsterdam, and Rose Marie. That’s an awesome collection of talent on one show. They were all brilliant, and Morey Amsterdam was a fucking genius. And even Richard Deacon was one of the great straight men of all time.”

“I agree, but you know what came close?” I said. “The Bob Newhart show. The first one, the one with Suzanne Pleshette.”

“Yeah, that was a great show. What’s your favorite movie?”

“The African Queen,” I said. “Hepburn **and** Bogie? How can you go wrong? Yours?”

“Singing In The Rain.”

“Do you know, I’ve actually never seen that.”

“WHAT?” he said incredulously. “You’ve never **seen** Singing In The Rain?”

“Nope,” I admitted. “I’ve seen An American In Paris, and the one he did with Sinatra, when they’re sailors on leave...”

“On The Town.”

“Right. And I liked both of them. But I’ve just never caught Singing In The Rain.”

“Oh, missy, you need some educatin’,” he teased. “So, I declare that, as soon as it is convenient for both of us—you and I, Miss Weinberg, have a date. You will come over to my house, where you will find a wide-screen TV, Singing In The Rain on DVD, and an abundance of popcorn. This offer can **not** be refused.”

“OK, then, I won’t refuse it,” I giggled—surprising myself, actually. “I’d love to see it.”

“Good. Then that’s settled.” He smiled at me. “You see, you tell me a few things about yourself, I return the favor—and we’re chatting like old friends.”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“And I bet you haven’t thought about being naked for the past ten minutes.”

“Wow. You’re right,” I said. “Of course, you **did** have to go and remind me!”

“Well, you would’ve been reminded anyway, it’s almost time to go to Bio.”

“True. Ed?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. But don’t thank me until **after** you’ve seen *Singing In The Rain*.”

CHAPTER THREE ED

Good Goddammit, a breakthrough. There really is a person in there—and an interesting one, too. Yay for Ed.

I’d seen *The African Queen* of course—like Natalie said, who can go wrong with Bogie and Hepburn—so we discussed it while we were walking to bio.

“You’re a die-hard romantic, aren’t you?” I teased.

“Only in fiction,” she sighed. “I know that real life doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, sometimes it does. Considering my two best friends—that’d be Mike and Amanda Frazier—are both involved in romances that even defy romance novels. So sometimes it works the way it’s supposed to—but not for the Edmeister.”

“What?” she giggled. “Mr. Entertainment is a cynic?”

“Mr. Entertainment has been there and has done that, and thus **became** a cynic.”

“Ah,” she said. “That’s not **my** particular problem, but I certainly can see it.”

“What’s your particular problem?”

“Bad role model,” she said. “When your mother brings home a different guy each week looking for The One, it tends to sour your viewpoint. There’s only one thing that guys want, and it’s not romance.”

“That’s not true at all,” I maintained.

“Oh, come on, Ed. You yourself just said you don’t do romance—and I know what your reputation around here is. You’ll do anything in a skirt.”

“Most of the guys in school will do anything in a skirt,” I argued. “I don’t do romance for my own reasons, but I **do** do non-sexual female companionship. You know who my two favorite females in the world are? One is Lily Woodard. The other is Ellie Kirkland. Lily is my best friend’s girlfriend—and, even if she weren’t, we’re not each other’s type romantically. But I’d rather spend an evening talking baseball and stuff with Lily than I would having sex with anybody. And Ellie is Mike’s **mom**, and she doesn’t go for guys, at least not anymore; she’s in a committed lesbian relationship. Plus she’s 39 years old. So obviously there’s nothing to do with sex there. And Ellie is one of the coolest human beings on the planet. Given a choice between sex and friendship, I’d choose friendship every time. Hands down.”

“Really?” she said, amazed.

“Really. Look, Lily calls me a pussyhound.” She let out a little embarrassed giggle at that. “But I’m not, really. I just don’t turn down opportunities when they present themselves. Look, if you turned to me right now and said, ‘Ed, you big stud, fuck me until I scream,’ I’d have to be **insane** to turn that down.” She giggled again at that. “However, if you gave me a choice between that, and bonding over a bowl of popcorn watching Gene Kelly strut his stuff, I’d pick the latter. And that’s the truth.”

“Hey, girls like me,” I told her. “They like me ‘cause I make ‘em laugh. If they want to go for it, and we both enjoy it, why not live it up, right? But it’s not the be-all and end-all of my existence. Not even close.”

“When you put it like that, it makes more sense,” she admitted. “I’ve never enjoyed it, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Waitaminnit. You’re **not** a virgin?”

“No,” she said tightly, “but that’s something I’d rather not discuss.”

“Fine by me,” I said, but it was another worrying sign about this girl.

We got to bio, and it was fine. I sat next to her, and she was alright. Ms T., sensing the situation, directed the questions about the program to **me**, and I did the Wacky Ed thing long enough to make Natalie crack up.

Evidently, things started to go awry again in the following period—gym. It was another class we shared—however, that didn't help in the locker room, because she was in the guys' and I was in the girls'. When she emerged from the locker room, she looked horrible again.

"Hey, Nat, are you OK?" I asked her. I don't even think she knew I was there. She just walked past, all hunched over and glassy-eyed.

Ty Christopher, a buddy of mine from the ball team who was also in that class, pulled me aside. "Three guys had her in the corner of the shower the whole time. They were feeling her up and stuff, and she just stood there like a statue. I tried to get them to stop, but they just said, 'Hey, she's in The Program, she has to let us.' Ed, man, I have to tell you, she did **not** look good."

"Damn," was all I could say.

We didn't meet up again until last period, when we both had trig. And she was a mess. Completely withdrawn and all curled up into a metaphorical ball again. I tried my best—when I sat next to her I leaned over and sang, "I'm singing in the rain, just singing in the rain," but that only got the faintest hint of a smile.

Damn. I didn't see **how** she was going to make it through this week.

CHAPTER FOUR

NATALIE

Oh God, oh God, what am I going to do?

I tried, I really tried. And Ed really **is** a sweetheart. And he **did** help.

But gym was just mortifying, and painful, and altogether horrific. They had me in that corner, and they kept **touching** me. I don't care what The Program's rules are, it felt like rape.

It felt like I had been being raped all day—by hands, by eyes. And I **know** this isn't normal, dammit, I **know** that. But I can't help how I feel.

Then, after that—and poor Ed trying desperately to get me to lighten up—I got to go home, and get raped again. By my mother.

"Did they put you in The Program this week?" she asked as soon as I got home.

"Yes, they did, and I can't believe you did this to me," I said angrily.

"Well, it's time you learned. You better get that body out there in circulation, before it's too late."

“Do you know how traumatic this day was for me?”

“Oh, stop being such a goddamn priss. You think your some kind of special. Spread your legs like the rest of us. You need a man.”

“I do **not** need a man.”

“You going to live in this hellhole for the rest of your life?”

“No, I’m not,” I said. “I’m going to college. You don’t pay a damn bit of attention to me, you don’t care about what I think.” After the day I had had, I wasn’t holding back anything from her. “You have no idea what my grades are. I’m going to get a scholarship, and go to college, and make my own way out of here.”

“You? That’s rich. You’re too stupid for that.”

“No, I’m not. You just think that way because **you’re** stupid. I don’t know if the asshole who knocked you up was a closet genius or I’m a genetic hiccup—but I’m smart. And you can’t recognize that because **you** are as dumb as a box of rocks.”

I never talked to my mother this way. This day had really gotten to me. And my little tirade earned me a nice slap right across the face. That didn’t surprise me. She’s not shy about hitting me.

I went a few more rounds with her, then went to do homework. She went to work. At least I had some peace and quiet.

Four more days. I had to do this for four more days. Help.

--End of part 1—

ED AND NATALIE NAKED IN SCHOOL PART TWO TUESDAY

CHAPTER FIVE ED

I had had a nice talk with my Mom Monday night—about Natalie. “Just do your best, that’s all anyone can ask of you,” she said. Mom always says things like that. That’s why I love her.

Anyhow, I came to school more determined than ever to see this girl get through the week in one piece.

It did **not** start out encouraging. I met her at the entrance and we had to undress in front of all those people. It was painful to watch. She was visibly forcing herself to take her clothes off. And when she got fondled and felt up afterwards—it was just, I don't even know how to describe it. It looked like it was just nightmarish to her.

I wonder if she'd been abused. I'd seen that before. I wasn't sure, though. She was just completely closed off from her body.

We got to accounting second period, and she barely talked to me. I tried to make her laugh, and didn't.

When I can't make someone laugh, there's a problem. Not to brag, but it's the truth. I could come to your mother's funeral and at least get a **chortle** out of you.

Worried, I skipped third period. Went down to see Mr. Tilling instead.

"Hey, Ed," he greeted me. "Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"You can give me a note. This is important."

"All right," he said—I think he was surprised to see me so serious. "What's on your mind?"

"I think we need to call a time-out. The Program isn't working, not this time. In fact, it might be making a bad situation worse."

"Ed, I'm surprised. Of all the people I thought might have a problem, **you** are the **last**...."

"Oh, no," I cut him off, "not me. I'm talking about Natalie."

"Oh," he said.

"Mr. Tilling, she's on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

"I know," he said simply.

"You **know**? And you let her go into The Program?" I was incredulous.

"I didn't have a choice. You know how parental consent for The Program works. Her mother **demand**ed she be placed."

"I have a strong suspicion that her mother is a big part of the problem," I told him.

"Yes, so do I. Ed, some of us know who Sharon Weinberg is. She works at Doc's. You know what Doc's is?"

“Yeah, it’s a bar,” I told him. “I don’t drink, but I know some guys that have gone to Doc’s. They’re notorious for not checking ID’s all that closely. The place is a real dive, though, from what I hear.”

“Yes, it is. And it attracts the kind of guys who you’d expect to be hanging out at a dive. And it’s common knowledge that Sharon Weinberg isn’t averse to taking those guys home.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I said.

“Rumor has it that you can buy your way into her bed. I don’t know how true that is, but that’s the rumor.”

“Oh, Christ,” I said, “And this is Natalie’s **mother**?”

“Yeah. We had her investigated by social services, but nothing came of it. Natalie, apparently, clammed up. Look, let me tell you something about Natalie Weinberg. Do you know where she’s ranked in your class?” he asked.

“Yeah, seventh, she told me yesterday.”

“Ed, the girl is gifted. She could probably be in contention for valedictorian if she had any kind of support from home. You know how gifted Lily Woodard is on the baseball mound—well, Natalie’s that gifted in the classroom. But she has no friends, no support system, no nothing. She’s completely closed off from everything. We don’t completely know what her home life is like, but we strongly suspect it’s not good. Quite frankly, we—that’s me and her teachers and all—are afraid we’re going to lose her.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” I told him.

“I can’t do anything about her being in The Program. I **had** to put her in. But, I’m going to tell you something—we, Ms. T and I, deliberately chose you to partner her. We don’t usually do that, but Natalie needs help. She needs a friend. And a lot of us remember what you did for Annie Zipelski.”

I was dumbfounded. Absolutely dumbfounded. “You **what**?”

“We all know that you can’t turn your back on someone in need. You got Annie out of hell—some of us know about that.”

I took a deep breath. “This is **not** fair.”

“What?” he asked.

“You say you know what I did for Annie. Do you know what that **cost** me? The only girl I have **ever** loved, and I lost her.” I laughed mirthlessly. “I didn’t get Annie out of the hell she was living in because I’m a fucking good Samaritan, I did it because I **loved** her. She

was my **girlfriend**, for crying out loud! And now you've stuck me in a position where you expect me to rescue someone that, a day ago, I didn't even **know**. And as an added bonus, you've dredged up all of those memories of Annie—memories I try to bury. Memories of Annie accepting my help, showering me with gratitude, and then **walking away**. Forever." I sighed. "Mr. Tilling, I am no saint. There is a part of me—a part I deny, a part I'm ashamed of, but it exists. And that part wishes I'd never gotten involved in Annie's home life, that I'd left things as they were. She might have not left me."

"And she might be hopelessly screwed up, or even dead," he said.

"I **know** that! I said it was the evil part of me." I took a breath. "And now you want me to do it again. And I'm stuck, because you're right—I **can't** turn away from someone in trouble. And since you've **so** thoughtfully **forced** me to support a person in trouble, I'm stuck." I sighed. "You know what's worse? I **like** Natalie. We had a nice talk at lunch yesterday. She's a good kid, and we have a whole mess of stuff in common, surprisingly enough. I could really like her, I think. And now I **can't**, because I refuse to get emotionally involved with another wounded bird. I can't go through **that** again."

"Ed, I'm sorry," Mr. Tilling said. "I didn't realize how much this was going to affect you."

"I can't even come up with a joke. I'm looking at this situation you've put me into, and I can't even come up with a joke. Me, Ed Bauer, at a loss for humor. How pathetic is that?" I turned away from his desk and abruptly walked out of his office.

Damn. Damn him all to hell.

I wanted to kill him. I wanted to wring his neck. How **dare** they do this to me? Girl in trouble, we can't handle it—let's call in Ed The Girlsaver to the rescue! After all, he saved Annie Zipelski's life, right?

Almost fucking took his **own** afterwards—but we'll just ignore that part. Damn them.

Walking through the halls, I calmed down. I **did** vow to myself, just this morning, that I was going to try to help this girl get through the week, didn't I? I guess being set up by Mr. Tilling didn't change that. It just made it more difficult, knowing that.

I had missed all of third period, and trudged into fourth, which was English. I got a wave from Lily, who shared that class with me.

That's when I got an idea.

I didn't have to do this by myself.

Natalie, I discovered yesterday, badly needed a friend. Friend is fine, friends—plural—is better, right? And who had a better bunch of friends than me?

So, on the way into the lunchroom, I rounded them all up, and asked for a favor. They all quickly and happily agreed. Like I said—nobody’s got a better bunch of friends than me.

CHAPTER SIX

NATALIE

If it weren’t for my desperate hope for a college scholarship, I wouldn’t have come in today. Or I would’ve walked out. But I wouldn’t be here. I can’t do this.

I made it to lunch, don’t ask me how. Dropped myself into my out-of-the-way chair. And here came Ed. Man, he really **was** trying, I’ll give him that. It was sweet, actually. I know he was only doing this because he had to—and because he’s a nice guy—but I would’ve given up on me long before this. He saw me in accounting, and I couldn’t even look at him.

But here he came. “Hey,” he said, sitting down across from me. “Want some company?”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“Good, cause here it comes.” Suddenly there were a pile of people sitting down at the table! Oh, shit, I couldn’t deal with **this**.

“So, this is where you’ve been hiding,” someone said, sitting down next to him. “Give me a french fry,” as he stole one from Ed’s plate. I realized it was Mike Kirkland, Ed’s best friend.

“Hi,” a beautiful redhead said as she sat next to me. “You must be Natalie. I’m Amanda Frazier.”

“Hey, I’m Lily Woodard,” the brunette sitting on the other side of me said.

“That stud across from me is Jared Wicklow, my boyfriend,” Amanda went on. “The guy on the other side of Ed is Mike Kirkland, Lily’s boyfriend.”

“That’s my identity now. Lily’s boyfriend,” Mike joked.

“The guy next to Mike is Frankie Gutierrez,” Ed said. “And across from Frankie is the world famous Maggie Benson.”

“No autographs, please,” Maggie quipped.

“We know Ed’s sitting here to help you through The Program,” Amanda was saying to me, “but lunch is no fun without Ed, so we thought we’d join you.”

“Nothing’s no fun without Ed,” said Ed.

“Hey, speaking of fun with Ed, I finished two verses,” Lily said.

“Of what?” Ed asked her.

She grinned at him impishly and started singing:

“What’s between Ed’s legs is frightful
It’s no bigger than just a mitefull
And the girls just don’t want to know
So make it grow, make it grow, make it grow!

Yeah, the thing that Ed’s got hangin’
Is a bit too small for bangin’
You’d do better with his left big toe
So make it grow, make it grow, make it grow!”

I have to admit, I was howling. Everyone was. Even Ed.

“Woodard,” Ed told her, “Here’s the scenario. One to nothing, us. Bases loaded, one out, top of the ninth. Tailor made double play ball to Ed. Right through his legs. **On purpose.** Runs score, Lily loses, Ed laughs.”

“You’d never. You like winning too much,” Lily told him.

“I think you just lost me,” I admitted.

“Baseball. Lily’s our star pitcher.”

“Really?” I said, surprised. A girl was the star pitcher?

“Yup,” Mike put in.

“I love baseball,” Lily told me. “And, yeah, I’m good. Mike’s on the team too, he’s our catcher. Frankie’s one of our other pitchers and center fielder.”

“Let me understand this,” I said. “You’re a pitcher, Mike’s a catcher, and you guys are going out?”

“Makes for an interesting locker room, I’ll tell you that,” Ed butt in.

“Ah, we’ve never done a thing in the locker room, and you know it,” Lily teased him. “Right field, that’s a different matter.” Everyone else chuckled, and she turned to me. “The first time we ever made love was in right field.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“Nope. It’s now become a running joke on the team. Mike kissed me the other day while we were standing on the sideline at practice, and Ty Christopher—that’s our first baseman--yelled, ‘Take that crap out to right field!’”

“Frankie keeps joking about putting up a sign,” Ed said. “Mike and Lily slept here.”

“There wasn’t any **sleeping** going on, Frankie,” Lily said.

“OK, Mike and Lily fucked here?” Frankie joked. “Mike and Lily came here would work, too, I suppose.”

“Oh, you bet your **ass** it worked,” Lily said.

I was dumbfounded. Just the way the conversation had gone, it just dumbfounded me.

“How’s the program going, Natalie?” Amanda asked me from the other side.

“Uh, not well,” I admitted.

“It gets easier,” she told me. “I had a lot of troubles too.”

“You did?” I said. I knew who Amanda was, and she had always been known as outgoing.

“Yeah. I was pretty repressed when it started. I was also a virgin. The whole thing terrified me. Turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“It did?” I said.

“Yeah. I got unrepressed in a hurry,” she laughed. “Lost my virginity, and found a boyfriend,” she told me. “Jared and I started going out then, but gave each other the rest of the week to experiment, because we’d both been repressed.”

“You started going out, but you experimented? With other people, I take you mean?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Jared told me. “We even had a threesome—the two of us and another girl.”

“And I got gangbanged shortly thereafter,” Amanda said.

“You’re kidding,” I was shocked. “Did you **like** that?”

“It was fun. Once, mind you. I’ve never done it again and don’t really want to. But I’m glad I did it once. Jared’s a **lot** more fun.” She grinned at him. The way those two looked at each other! “Anyhow, what I was saying about The Program—it loosened me up, let me discover myself sexually, got me a boyfriend. Discussions about it also led to my

mother loosening up. Which was a small miracle. And **that** just about saved my parents' marriage—to the point where I'm going to have a little brother or sister in July."

"Wow," I said.

"How's your Mom doing, by the way?" Mike asked her.

"Great. She's had amniocentesis—she is 42, after all—and everything looks great. My parents are over the moon about it. Mom's five months along now and starting to show. I thought that would, you know, bring her down—but she's glowing."

"I bet you're thrilled to be the handy live-in babysitter," Lily teased.

"Ah, only for a year or so, before I go to college. That's the only thing that really sucks, actually, is that I won't be around for a lot of the kid's growing up. So, for that year I'm there—and when I come home on breaks—I'll probably be **volunteering** to baby-sit." She grinned at me "I'll just have Jared help. Feed the kid, change the diaper, put it to bed—and then find other ways of amusing ourselves."

They seemed so into sex. Which just amazed me. I really **am** a freak.

"Hey, Natalie," Mike asked. "You're in Trig last period with Ed and I, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Ed says you're a brain." I giggled at that. "Did you get what Mr. Frey was saying at the end yesterday?"

"Sure." I explained what Mr. Frey had talked about at the end of class yesterday.

"OK. I get it now. Thanks, Natalie, you made more sense than Mr. Frey. Ed's right, you really are smart, aren't you?"

"Yeah, he told us you were seventh in the class?" Lily said.

"Yeah," I said sheepishly.

"That's awesome," Jared said. "I'm pretty proud of being twenty-third. Seventh is awesome." I just blushed.

"So, you ready to play third base in the nude?" Mike asked Ed.

"No, I am **not**. But I figure if Lily can pitch in the nude, I can handle it."

"I was in The Program the week of **tryouts**," Lily told me. "Me and this gorgeous talented catcher, who helped me out."

“I taped her boobs,” Mike laughed.

“They were getting in the way of me throwing, and sports bras were forbidden, so he came up with this ingenious solution involving an ace bandage,” Lily laughed.

“So, you went to tryouts wearing nothing but an ace bandage around your chest?” I asked.

“Well, they let me wear socks and my cleats,” she laughed. “And not just tryouts, but our first game. Which I pitched.”

“And won,” Mike jumped in. “And scored the winning run.”

“And tore my entire right leg up sliding into home with said winning run,” Lily laughed.

“You guys on the baseball team seem to have a lot of fun,” I commented.

“We do, it’s a blast,” Ed said. “We’ve got a home game today at 3:30. You should come.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Sure, come on,” Amanda told me. “You can sit with Jared and I, we’re going.”

My mother would be furious. Did I care anymore? “I’ll think about it,” I said. Changing the subject, I said, “It seems like those of you who have gone through the Program actually enjoyed it.”

“I think we all did,” Mike said. “At this table, it’s just the four of us, Lily and I and Amanda and Jared—well, now we can add you and Ed.”

“Yeah,” I said. But what I thought was this—you all enjoyed it. But Ed’s not. He brought you all over here to help me out. He’s spending this entire week—which **normal** people, apparently, enjoy—watching over a terrified mentally-scarred hopeless case. It’s not fair. It’s not fair to him.

I think that’s when the light started to dawn on me.

Ed was being so nice. And his **friends** were being nice, too. I now know why he valued his friends so much. I had a feeling he asked them to come sit with us. And they were friendly, they included me in the conversation, Mike asked me about Trig. I realized, it was like talking to Ed yesterday. I forgot, for a few minutes, how naked I was.

That’s when I made a decision. No more ‘woe is me’ stuff, not about The Program. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I was going to stick it out. I was going to try to relax about it as much as I could.

I didn’t think I’d ever **enjoy** it, per se, but **Ed** deserved to. He didn’t need me bringing him down.

Anyhow, lunch was over, and it was time to go to Bio. Ed, Jared, Amanda, and Maggie all walked with me.

The guys were stopping me, as usual. I was getting felt up, as usual.

After one, Amanda asked me, “Why do you get all stiff and vacant when they do that?”

“I don’t like it much,” I admitted, blushing.

“Really? That’s a pity. When I was in the program, I loved it,” she giggled.

“I thought you said you were repressed at the beginning,” I said to her.

“Yeah, and having a few fingers in your pussy will unrepress you in a hurry,” she laughed.

“Doesn’t seem to work for me,” I said. “I just feel like I’m being used.” I’m surprised I admitted that to her.

What she said surprised me more. “Used? Natalie, that’s **your** pussy. If they’re using it, it’s to get **you** off. If they **really** wanted to use you, they’d be whipping out their dicks.”

I never thought of it that way.

Anyway, bio was fine. Ed made me laugh. But I was dreading gym. I got in and out of the locker room in a hurry. We were outside, playing tennis, which was an interesting thing to do in the nude. I think I pulled every muscle in my chest from those things bouncing around. But it was all right. It was the shower I was dreading.

On the way into them, I saw Ed. He grabbed me, and I noticed, also standing there, was this **huge** black kid. I’d seen him around, but didn’t know who he was.

“Nat, I want you to meet Ty Christopher. He’s the first baseman on the baseball team, and a good friend.”

“Pleased to meet you, Natalie,” he said I shook his hand. Wow, what a voice!

“Ty’s gonna watch out for you,” Ed told me. “He’s going to take care of you in the shower. And he’s safe. If he lays a hand on you, Emma will kick his ass.”

“Emma’s my girlfriend,” Ty laughed.

Oh, man. How sweet was **this**? But I felt compelled to point something out. “Guys, I really appreciate this. But I can’t say no, remember? Reasonable request and all that.”

“Yes, but **I** can say no,” Ty said. “Hey, if worse comes to worse, we’ll go in a corner and I’ll **pretend** I’m doing something to you. That’ll keep ‘em off.”

“What if word gets back to Emma?” I asked worriedly.

“HEY, EMMA!” Ed yelled. A tall brunette came running up. “Hey, Em, if you hear any scuttlebutt about Ty messing with someone in the shower, don’t believe it. This here is Natalie, she’s my Program partner this week, and she needs a little help fending off the jackals.”

“That’s fine,” she smiled. “Having a tough time?” she asked. I nodded yes. “Ty will watch out for you. He’s good at that,” she giggled. She leaned up and kissed him. “And if **you** hear any rumors about me messing with Ed in the shower, believe every word.” She sashayed off to the showers at that, throwing a kiss back at Ty, while Ed followed her making like a lovesick puppy. Ty just laughed.

“Come on,” he chuckled, and led me into the shower. And he **did** watch out for me. We huddled in a corner. I actually let him wash my chest, for cover—and, you know what? I didn’t mind. Probably because he was being so respectful about it. I **knew** he wasn’t doing this for a cheap thrill. And he pretended to stick his hand in between my legs to throw the scent off. I didn’t get bothered by anyone else at all.

We talked while we showered. Somehow the subject of art came up, and he told me that Emma was a talented sculptress.

“I draw,” I told him.

“Really? I’m surprised. You don’t seem to tote a sketchpad around, like every other artist I know,” he laughed. “Emma always has one—she sculpts from sketches sometimes.”

“I never felt comfortable doing that.”

“You should,” he maintained. “Lots to draw around here.”

After that, we left, and I went to my last two classes. It was better. After school, I made a decision. Going out to the entrance to fetch my clothes, I saw Ed.

“I’m taking you up on your invitation. I never go to any school functions around here, so I’m going to come watch you play baseball,” I said.

“That’s great! Come with me, I’ll walk you over.”

“Great. Just let me get dressed,” I told him.

“Oops. Sorry, Nat, you can’t.” I just looked at him. “This is a school function. You have to stay nude.”

“Oh, shit,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I **knew** I had to play nude, so I just forgot.” He looked at me hopefully. “Are you going to come anyway?”

I decided to go. Ed even bought my ticket, the sweetie, and showed me where Jared and Amanda were sitting, before he went into the locker room.

“Hey, I’m glad you came!” Amanda said.

“Yeah,” I told her, “but I forgot I was going to have to sit here in the nude.”

“Ah, it’s not that bad,” she said.

“Easy for **you** to say, you have clothes on,” I teased. Suddenly, Jared and Amanda grinned at each other and nodded. Next thing I know, they were taking all their clothes off! I was stunned. In a minute, they sat back down, as naked as I was.

“Feel less self-conscious now?” Amanda asked. I just sputtered. Amanda laughed. “Ever since we went through the program, we’ve discovered a liking for nudity. On a nice day like today, why not? It’s very freeing.”

I was amazed. Then I happened to look over past Amanda at Jared. You want to talk about amazing? I think my eyes popped out of my head. Amanda noticed. “Hey, honey. I think somebody just discovered Jared’s Secret,” she giggled.

“She must have not been paying attention in September when I was in the program,” Jared laughed.

“I must not have,” I admitted. Jared was **huge**! Between the legs, I mean.

“Now you know why I love him,” Amanda teased.

“Oh, is that all? See this, Natalie? I’m being used. Shamefully used. I feel so cheap,” he mock-sobbed.

“Hey, is this the nudists section?” I heard. It was a young girl of about eleven or twelve. She climbed in the bench behind us.

“Hey, Amber, how are you?” Jared asked. “This is Natalie. She’s going through the program this week and she’s a little uncomfortable. Nat, this is Amber. She’s Lily’s sister.”

“Hi,” Amber said. “So these two decided to keep you company?”

“Yeah,” I smiled.

“Cool. The more the merrier,” she said—and started taking off **her** clothes! All right, now I’d seen **everything**. Amanda laughed.

“The week Lily and Mike were in the program was the week of the school carnival,” Amanda explained. “Mike and Lily brought Amber. They **had** to go nude, of course. We met up with them and decided to go nude ourselves. Amber felt left out, so she joined us.”

“And I found out how much **fun** it is,” Amber declared. “I wish they had The Program in middle school. I go nude all the time. I love how the wind makes my titties perky.” I almost swallowed my tongue at that one!

“How old are you?” I asked her.

“I’ll be 12 next month,” she said. Amazing. A 12-year-old likes going nude—and I’m paralyzed by it. Why hadn’t **I** noticed the wind on my—er—titties? “Who’s your partner?” she asked.

“Ed Bauer.”

“Oh, you’re cavorting nude around school with my boyfriend?” she asked. BOYFRIEND? “No, I’m just kidding,” she laughed. “That’s our little joke.” She sounded older than 12.

“Amber’s pretty precocious,” Amanda whispered in my ear. You ain’t kidding! “Ed showed her a good time at the carnival, and now she’s got a crush on him. But she knows he’s too old for her. She’s quite a kid.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Hey,” I said, just thinking of something, “do either of you have a cel phone I can use?”

“Sure,” Amanda said, and dug hers out of her bookbag, and handed it to me.

I dialed. “Hello?” I heard.

“Mom, it’s Natalie.”

“ **Where** are you?”

“At school. I’m staying to watch a baseball game. I don’t know when I’m coming home.”

“YOU GET HOME THIS INSTANT! You have chores!” Yeah, like every chore in the house. Wouldn’t want you to stop drinking long enough to wash a dish.

“Mom, I’ll do them when I get home.”

“You will do them NOW.”

“Listen, I just called to tell you where I was. That’s where I am. I’ll be home when I’m home.” I was fed up.

“NATALIE, YOU WILL GET YOUR ASS....” I hung up on her.

“That sounded pleasant,” Amanda said.

“It always is,” I sighed. Just then, the players came out into the field. Ed walked over to where we were seated behind third base.

“Hey! It’s the nudists’ section! How’s my pint-sized nude girlfriend?” he said to Amber, kissing her on the cheek.

“I’m fine,” she blushed.

“Hands off my sister, Bauer, you reprobate,” Lily laughed as she walked by.

“Oh, go away, Lily,” Amber spouted, to laughter.

“How are you doing?” Ed then asked me.

“Fine. Everybody else decided to go nude, too. I’m feeling less self-conscious,” I admitted.

“Jared and Amanda need less of an excuse than that to go nude, believe me,” he laughed.

“True, true,” Jared agreed.

After that, they went to warm up, and then the game started. It was a lot of fun. We won by something like 9 to nothing. Ed even hit a home run. And Lily really **is** good. Jared and Amanda helped me with some of the stuff about baseball I didn’t really know. I had a great time.

I’m really glad I went.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ED

After the game, I ran over to where they were sitting. “We’re hitting the Burger Hut afterwards. Who’s coming?”

“I can’t,” Amber said.

“Ah, well, I’ll just have to get another date then,” I teased.

“You’ll live,” Amber teased. “Anyway, my Mom’s here.” She kissed me on the cheek, and waved goodbye to the rest of them, then ran over to her Mom’s car. Still naked. I think Natalie was completely stunned.

“We’ll be there, but I already have a date,” Amanda giggled.

“Fine, be that way,” I said. “How about you, dear Natalie. You wouldn’t force a poor, defenseless, naked third baseman to show up at the post-game Greasefest sans date, would you?”

She giggled. “Do most people go to the post-game Greasefests with a date?”

“Well, no, not really, but forget that part,” I grinned. She giggled again. **Finally** the vaunted Bauer wit was working. “Come on. You can even get dressed for this.”

“I really should go home. My mother’s pissed I was even here,” she said, then thought for a minute. “And I don’t care anymore. I’d love to go,” she said.

“Great. Wait here, while I shower and stuff.”

I went in, got cleaned up, and got out in a hurry. Natalie had dressed. She was wearing something a little less armor-like than her usual get-up—a mid-calf chino skirt and a blue polo shirt. I walked her to my car.

“You sure this is all right? Your mom and all?”

“No, but I don’t care,” she said. Then she giggled. “Of course, I **should’ve** decided to get rebellious on a night she was **working**, then I’d get home after she went to work. But I don’t care.”

“OK, then.” We headed to Burger Hut, got our food, and grabbed a table with Mike and Lily, Jared and Amanda. It was fun. Natalie was **really** loosening up. I congratulated myself on a great idea—getting the Ed Posse involved in helping her. It really did help. Natalie and Amanda really hit it off.

We got back in the car and I said that to her. “Yeah, I like Amanda,” she told me.

“She and Mike are my best friends, have been forever.” I looked at the clock. It was plenty early, but I said, “I suppose you need to go home.”

“I suppose. Why?”

“Well, I do **still** owe you that date.”

“I thought I was your date at the Burger Hut,” she giggled.

“No, I meant **the** date. Singing In The Rain.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah! Let’s do it,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

She got serious for a minute. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked. I nodded. “The later I stay out, the more my mother will drink. The more she drinks, the better chance that she’ll be passed out on the couch before I come home.”

“Oh, shit, Natalie,” I said.

“That’s my dirty little secret. Well, one of them.” She visibly collected herself. “Anyway, spending time with you watching old musicals is vastly preferable to dealing with a drunk. So, please, take me to Gene Kelly, kind sir,” she smiled.

I did. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but she clearly didn’t want to go home. I was thinking that I didn’t blame her. She was enjoying herself, and didn’t want it to end. I got the impression that ‘fun’ wasn’t a word much in her vocabulary.

Anyhow, we pulled up, walked in, and Mom and Dad were there.

“Hey, Ed, how’d the game go?” Dad asked.

“We romped. Nine-zip. I went two for four with a dinger, and Lily was her usual unhittable self.”

“Great. Any problems with the nudity?” Mom asked.

“No, Lily didn’t let them hit any line drives at my exposed ass.” They laughed at that. “Mom, Dad, this is my friend Natalie Weinberg. Nat, this is my parents. Natalie’s my program partner this week.”

“Hi,” she said. Dad came over and shook her hand.

“Come in, come in,” Mom smiled. “What are you two up to?”

“Well, I was wondering if we could commandeer the TV.”

“What for?” Dad asked.

“Well, Natalie here fancies herself to be an old film buff, and she’s never seen *Singing In The Rain*,” I said.

“Well, we can’t have **that**, can we?” Dad said, smiling at Natalie. “That’s a travesty.”

“That’s what I said,” I grinned.

“Well, of course, how can we deny **that** kind of educational opportunity?” Dad said. “It’s all yours. We’ll go upstairs.”

“Thanks, guys,” I said. I went over to find the DVD.

“Ed, you want me to put some popcorn in?” Mom asked.

“Thanks, Mom, that’d be great.” I looked at Nat. “Sit,” I smiled, pointing to the couch. She grinned back, and did. I got the DVD out, put it in the player, and let the opening stuff run while I went to check on the popcorn. I grabbed it and a couple cokes and sat down next to her.

“Your parents are really nice,” she said.

“Yeah, they are,” I agreed.

The movie started, and, as always, I got into it. As I expected, Natalie got into it, too. We were sitting side by side, the popcorn bowl in between us, munching away and laughing. After Donald O’Connor did his “Make ‘Em Laugh” bit, Natalie turned to me and said, “Now I know why you like this movie so much. It’s got your philosophy of life in it.”

“You got that right.”

After the dance scene in the soundstage between Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds, she turned to me and said, “You’re right. This is great.”

The popcorn was gone by then, so I put the bowl on the coffee table in front of us. And she moved closer to me. We were practically touching, side by side, on the couch.

So, I did what seemed natural. I put my arm around her. She sighed, smiled, and snuggled up to me. I must admit, it felt nice. Of course, part of my brain was screaming “Danger Will Robinson Danger!” but the part that **liked** snuggling up to a sweet, warm girl told the danger part to shut up.

All right, dammit, I admit it. I liked her. God save me, but I liked her. I was in big fucking trouble.

I’d deal with that later. Who cared about **that** when you’re snuggled up to a gorgeous sweetheart watching the greatest movie ever made? Who cared about memories of getting your heart put through a shredder, when Gene Kelly was dancing up a storm on a wet soundstage, and the lovely curled up by your side was enjoying it as much as you did? Yeah, I thought about Annie. A few memories crept up. I just let Gene’s dancing feet stomp all over ‘em.

Like I said—big fucking trouble. After Amanda went through her sex-drenched Program week, she told me she had discovered a few things. First of all, that there were certain acts that were more intimate than sex. Kissing. Undressing each other. I think cuddling

would qualify. I agreed with her—which is why, though I had sex a lot—I **didn't** cuddle. And here I was, not only cuddling—but cuddling with someone that I was **not** going to have sex with. And **enjoying** it. She looked up at me and giggled, “that’s **awesome!**” right after Gene Kelly and Donald O’Connor’s stunning “Moses” routine.

Annie didn’t like old movies. She never got “Singing In The Rain.” Now, why did my brain dig up **that** little factoid right at this moment?

Damn, my brain was out of control. Good thing I know this movie by heart.

When it was over, she sighed, and looked up at me happily, “You were right. That’s one hell of a movie.”

“Told you,” I said. I took my arm from around her shoulders and stretched. It was harder to stay cuddled without Gene’s dancing feet. “I’d better get you home.”

“Yeah,” she agreed sadly. We got up and trudged to my car.

“Ed?” she said right after I started driving. “Thanks. For everything. I haven’t had this much fun in ages.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “I had fun, too.”

We headed into town. “You can drop me off at the bowling alley.”

“You live at the bowling alley?”

She giggled. “No, but I just live right around the corner.”

“Where do you live?”

“Just a little ways up Gorham street.”

“I can take you.”

She sighed. And then said, very softly, “Ed, I don’t want you to see where I live.”

“Look, you’ve told me enough about your mother that I didn’t guess that you lived in the mansion on the hill. And none of this is **your** fault. I won’t hold where you live against **you**. And the way I was brought up, a gentleman always escorts a lady to her door.”

“OK,” she sighed.

We got to her apartment building—dingy and run-down, as I suspected—and I insisted on walking to her door. She let me. She grabbed her key and started fumbling with the lock, when we heard, “NATALIE! Issat you? Finally fucking come home?”

Nat opened the door, and there stood this drunken woman. “WHERE THE FUCK YOU BEEN?”

“Out,” Natalie said. “We went to the game, and then out to eat, and then Ed took me to his house to watch a movie.”

“Movie?” the mother slurred. “Yeah, right. So,” she said right at me, “didja fuck ‘er?”

“Excuse me?”

“Didja fuck ‘er?” Then, to Natalie. “Is he **rich**? Bag yourself a sugar daddy? Or did he just pay you for tonight?” I was recoiling in horror. This was one of the most disgusting things I’d seen in a long time.

“We watched a **movie**!” Natalie maintained. “Ed likes old movies, too.”

CRASH! That was this crazy woman’s **glass**! It had crashed against the wall—and had missed Natalie’s head by three inches! “DONCHOO FUCKIN’ LIE TO ME!” she was screaming. “And you!” to me, “Fuckin’ nobody fucks my daughter for free, you unnerstand? You better be paying!”

The next thing I know, Natalie was shoving me back through the door. She followed me out, while her nutcase mother ranted and raved back in the apartment. “Ed, you need to leave,” she said firmly.

“Leave? How can I leave? She just threw a **glass** at you!”

“Usually it’s plates,” she said matter-of-factly. I was just stunned. “Look, if you leave, I can get to my bedroom. I have a lock, she can’t come in there. Please. I don’t want you to see any more of this. **Please**.” The last one was a beg.

“Natalie, I’m really worried about you,” I told her.

She actually smiled. “It’s nice to have someone worrying about me for a change. I never have anyone worried about me. But I’ll be fine.”

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

She knew what I meant. “Meet me in the parking lot an hour before school tomorrow and I’ll tell you the whole thing, OK? But now you have to go.”

“OK,” I said. “I’m going. Be careful.”

“I will.” She smiled, and then re-entered the apartment.

Damn. This girl’s in trouble. Her life’s a mess. And, when she lets down her guard, I find her delightful. I liked her.

As Yogi Berra once said, “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

What I didn’t know was **how** bad. I’d find out tomorrow, hopefully. If it was Annie Redux, I didn’t know if I’d cope.

I didn’t sleep all that well that night.

--End of Part Two—

ED AND NATALIE NAKED IN SCHOOL
PART THREE
WEDNESDAY

CHAPTER EIGHT
NATALIE

I managed to get by my mother right after Ed left—locked myself in my room. She eventually passed out.

I had a lot to think about.

I was still thinking the next morning, as I got ready for school. She was still passed out, thank goodness, so I had some peace and quiet. I got dressed, took my shower, made some eggs. And thought.

Ed was the first person I’d **ever** let in this apartment. Yeah, he was insistent, with all that chivalry bullshit, but I could’ve put my foot down. I didn’t. I let him in here. And he saw good ol’ Sharon Weinberg at her disgusting best. I must really trust him.

Now **there’s** a thought to send a shiver down my spine.

I also thought back to what happened while watching the movie. He actually put his arm around me. I think I’ve already established that I don’t like to be touched. I didn’t mind his arm around me at **all**. I actually felt safe. Feeling safe is not something I’m accustomed to. It was very nice.

And, yeah, OK, he was right. That’s one hell of a movie. I wonder what other good ones he has that I’ve never seen?

All this was swimming through my head as I prepared to walk to school. And, damn, it was raining. Not a lot, but enough to get me wet. I grabbed my umbrella and trudged off to school, an hour early.

Ed was there. He saw me coming, jumped out of his car, and started singing. Well, it was raining, what do **you** think he was singing? He even danced a little as I walked towards him. He's no Gene Kelly, but it was funny and sweet all the same.

"You're a nut, you know that?" I giggled.

"That's my job," he smirked. "Get in the car, we can talk there, out of the rain." I did, still giggling. I stopped giggling quickly.

"Are you OK? I was worried about you all last night," he said.

"This is strange. I am **not** used to people worrying about me. But I'm fine. I got away from her right after you left."

"Good."

"Ed, you've been so sweet. The past two days, you've done so much to try to help me. You've offered friendship. You even offered your friends' friendship. I'm kind of stunned. Nobody's ever done that for me."

"Natalie, you're a good person," he said.

"I try to be. I don't know how good I am. Sometimes I think I'm beyond help. But if you want to know the whole story, I think I need to unburden myself. And somehow, after only two days, I trust you."

"I'm glad," he said. "You tell me whatever you need to get off your chest."

I took a breath. "I've told **nobody** all this. Like I said, somehow I trust you." He nodded. "OK, I need to get this out all at once if I'm going to get it out at all. So don't interrupt me, please, OK?" He nodded again.

"My mother had me when she was seventeen. Why she didn't give me up puzzles me to this day. I have no idea who my father is. He took off. Ever since then, my mother's been trying to replace him."

"She works at Doc's. You know what that is?" Ed nodded. "It's a sleazy dive. She picks up men there. She's still trying to score 'the' guy, the one that'll get her out of the miserable existence she's confined herself to. If you're looking for a sugar daddy, Doc's sure ain't the place to get it. But maybe she picks up pocket change. I don't know for sure she's a whore, but I suspect it."

"You saw last night what she does on her nights off. She drinks herself into a stupor."

"She doesn't cook, she doesn't clean. I do all that. I even do the grocery shopping. I have been since I was ten or so. If I didn't, we wouldn't have any groceries. At least she gives me money for that. I don't get much money for much else. I've worked every summer."

Plus, my grandparents left me a trust fund. Not much, but enough for clothes and stuff. They hated my mother for getting knocked up at seventeen, but, luckily, they didn't take it out on me. When they were alive, I had a bit of an oasis to go to. They're gone now. But they did leave me some money. And they made sure I could get into the trust fund at a young age, and made sure my mother couldn't get at it—their banker is my co-trustee. I use that to buy clothes, toiletries, stuff like that. If I didn't, I wouldn't have any."

"I think my mother figured out just as I entered puberty that she was getting too old and used up to use her body for a meal ticket out of the slums. So, that's when she decided **I'd** be a fine one. I lost my virginity at 15. She arranged it. He was thirty." Poor Ed gasped at that. "I don't know for sure if he paid my mother for the 'privilege', but I have my suspicions. Evidently, I wasn't good enough, because he never came back. I guess my screaming terror when he took my virginity scared him off. Mom just moved on to number two and number three—both older. Number four, I revolted. He was disgusting. I ran out of the car and ran home. I got a beating for that. Yes, she hits me."

"I strongly suspect she pushed me into The Program so I'd get scooped up by some kid with money. She tells me all the time how much men love my body, and how I have to use it, because that's all I have."

"All you have?" Ed said. "You're ranked seventh in the class! Oops, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

I smiled at him. "That's OK. My mother doesn't look at my report cards. A girl, making it on brains? Completely doesn't get the concept. All girls have is a body. I told her the other night that she just thinks I'm as dumb as a rock because **she** is. I got slapped for that, too. Anyway, that's her thing—your body is all you got, so sell it to the nearest bidder. Lily Woodard would **really** blow her mind, huh?" Ed managed a grin at that.

"Amanda asked me yesterday why I freeze up when I get touched. This is why. I've had it drummed into my head for so long that my body is to be used for men's pleasure that the programming kicks in, even though I **know** intellectually that it's bullshit. This is why I'm scared of my own shadow. This is why I hated parading my body around naked. Ed, I don't even play with myself. I can't. I used to, a little, before I lost my virginity. I think I'm frigid. Amanda told me she liked it when guys played with her while she was in the program. I get no pleasure out of it—just pain and disgust. And I don't know how to fix it. I don't even know if I **can**. I might be too brainwashed."

"So, that's Natalie's story. The child of a drunk irresponsible whore, who's been encouraged since puberty to whore herself. I have no friends, I have no life. The only thing that keeps me going is that seventh in the class thing. A college scholarship—that's my only hope. I think my grades are good enough. Grandpa's trust fund isn't enough to pay for college, I need the scholarship. That's the only way I get out of this."

"Now you know why I love Bogie, and Hepburn, and why some of that trust fund and my summer job money goes to videotapes. Because it's my escape—my only one. For two hours, I can live in another world—and forget about mine."

“So now you know.”

CHAPTER NINE

ED

What do you say to that? I mean, **what** do you say to that? My God.

It wasn't as bad as the story I heard from Annie Zipelski on that day two years ago, but it was close.

I started with what I had told Annie on that day. “Natalie, I think you need to talk to someone.”

“I just did,” she managed a smile.

“Yes, but I'm talking about a professional.”

“I can't. I just can't. For one thing, the poor excuse for health insurance my mother gets at Doc's wouldn't cover it. For another thing, I just can't. For one thing, it'd end up in child protective services.”

“Wouldn't that be a **good** thing?” I asked.

“No, it wouldn't. Foster care? At my age? Ed, I have a little over a year and I can get out of here. I can hold on for that long.”

“OK,” I said, “but if you change your mind, I can arrange it—and I don't think, in this case, money would be a problem. I told you I love Mike's mom, Ellie. She's a child psychologist, specializing in adolescents, and she's a good one. Written books and everything. And I **think** she can take you as a client and avoid protective services, for someone of your age—I can check with her, without revealing any details of course. But it might help. You might even just want to talk to her informally. I can arrange that, too. There's nobody better.”

“I'll think about it,” she said. “Now that you know, what do you think?”

“I think you're incredibly brave,” I said.

“Brave? ME? If I was brave, I wouldn't be living in a shell.”

“If you weren't brave, you wouldn't be **living**. Like I said, my best friend's mother is a psychologist. I know quite a bit. And I know teenagers commit suicide every day with a lot less reason that you have.”

“I never thought of it like that,” she said. “I suppose you're right. I guess it's hard to think of yourself as brave when you dread getting out of bed in the morning.”

“I can understand that,” I said.

“I’m glad you think I’m brave, though. I thought, after you knew, you might, you know....”

“What?”

“You know...think I’m....”

“What, you thought I’d think less of you?” I asked. She nodded. “That’s nuts. Completely nuts. I like you, Natalie, I think you’re great. What your **mother** is doesn’t change that.”

“Thanks,” she whispered. “That means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

“Your mother is why you don’t make friends easily, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Ed, you’re the first person I’ve ever taken to my apartment. Like I said, I must really trust you for some insane reason.” She managed a smile at that.

“I’m just Mr. Trustworthy,” I joked.

“Yeah. Anyhow, yeah, I didn’t want anyone to know, so I avoided contact. Plus, remember Monday? Remember how I almost took your head off?” I nodded. “There’s a time bomb inside me waiting to explode, I know that. That’s the other reason I find it hard to get close.”

“Well, you’ve got friends now. Me, **and** my cronies. Amanda thinks you’re sweet.”

“I know,” she smiled. “It’s made more of a difference than I ever imagined.”

“I’m glad about that,” I said. “Unfortunately, look at the time. We need to go up there and get nekkid.”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “Oh, well. Two down, three to go.”

“Days?”

“Yeah,” she grinned.

“Is it any better?” I asked her.

“You know what? Yeah, it is,” she admitted. “Not **good**, mind you, but better.”

We headed towards the school. And, as I watched her throughout the day, I realized—it **was** better. The only thing that wasn’t better was the touching thing—and that worried me. But the rest was definitely better. We all ate lunch with her, and she really was

loosening up. Look, sometimes it's simple. She made some friends. We took her out and she had fun. I took her home to see a great movie, and she had fun. Then I let her unburden herself on me. Sometimes little things make a difference.

I was glad, I really was. I liked this girl. **That** thought scared the living daylights out of me, but that wasn't important right now. I could deal with that when the time came.

But, still, there was the touching thing. It was painful to watch, every time. I don't know how someone can be so out of touch with their body. As I said, Ellie Kirkland is a psychologist, and she's got some definite ideas about sexuality, including teenage sexuality, all of which I agree with. And "be in touch with your body" is one of her favorite maxims. Another one is that if you've had a bad experience, or bad experiences, you need a **good** one—and as soon as possible. The longer you wait, the more the damage festers. Natalie had some serious damage festering. Ellie says that a good touch can do a whole hell of a lot to mitigate a bad one.

That's when I got an idea. It was insane. It was ridiculous. It was potentially dangerous, for her **and** for me. But if I did it right.....

I had to try **something**. I just **had** to.

So, after school, I approached her.

CHAPTER TEN

NATALIE

I wasn't lying to Ed. It **was** better. I was actually adjusting to being nude. Unbelievable.

Now, if only I could figure out a way to stop stiffening like a board every time anyone touched me.

I guess that's too much to ask.

Anyway, school was better than it had been. I liked Ed's friends, every one of them. They were fun and interesting. Amanda's one of the sweetest people I've ever met, and Lily is almost as funny as Ed. And Ed himself?

OK, I admit it. There were some very definite feelings developing there. I didn't know quite what they were, but they were there. Look, yeah, I know part of Ed's personality was that of a caretaker. A rescuer, a healer—hell, he has more of a maternal instinct than my mother. And I also won't deny that there was a very prominent part of me that just **longed** to be taken care of.

But that wasn't all. He made me laugh. We had a boatload in common, imagine that. He was easy to talk to, I found that out that morning. And, I'll admit it—when he had his arm around me the previous night, I felt a funny little twinge in the pit of my stomach. That was **not** something I was used to at all!

So, I had all this going through my head when we met up at the entrance after school.

“We have no baseball practice because of the rain. Are you busy right now?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Will your mother freak if you don’t come home?”

“Yes, but let her,” I laughed. “If you keep me out long enough, she’ll be at work before I show up.”

“Good enough. Come on, let’s get to my car.”

“Aren’t we going to get dressed?” I asked.

“No need for that. Come on!” He was walking to his car. No **need** to get **dressed**? What the hell was he up to?

I got in the car—nude, as was he—and looked at him and giggled, “What, do you want to watch Casablanca in the nude or something?”

“Oh, I’ve got better ideas than that,” he grinned. I’ll admit it, I winced. “Now, now, none of that. Remember what you said this morning? You trust me.”

He was right. I **did**. So I smiled and said, “OK.” We drove and then came to his house. I looked at him.

“Come on in,” he said. “Nobody’s home, Mom and Dad don’t get home until after six.”

OK, I thought. There’s nobody home, he’s taking me in, and we’re both nude. Scared? I was **terrified**. I **did** trust him, but this was scary—moreso when he took me to his **bedroom**.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said when we got there.

“Ed,” I gulped, “I’m not sure about this. I mean, did you want to.....I can’t, I mean.....”

“This is not what you’re thinking. I’m not planning on doing anything to abuse your trust. OK?”

“OK,” I said tentatively.

“Lie down on the bed. On your side, facing away from me.” I just looked at him. “I just love how trusting you are,” he joked.

I laughed, but then said, “You’re asking a lot from me.”

“I know. But it will be all worth it. I promise.”

“OK,” I said, and did as he ask. Then I felt him curl up behind me. He wrapped his arms around my waist. We were in his bed, both nude, and spooning! How on **earth** did I let this happen? I wanted to jump up and run out the door. Except, for that little part of my brain that registered his arms cuddling me into him. That part of the brain kept saying, “This is nice, isn’t it?”

Then he started talking. “You know, I hope, what a penis is.” I just laughed. “Mine’s behind you. It’s hard. No big surprise, considering I’m holding a naked gorgeous girl in my arms.” I giggled again, but was also scared—until he kept talking. “The only reason I told you that is if you feel something bumping up your butt inadvertently, you’ll know what it is. Other than that, Ed’s penis is no longer a topic for discussion. It’s not a topic for anything. It doesn’t exist. If **I** wanted anything from **you**, I’d make you go for the dick. Grab it, lick it, suck it, fuck it, whatever. Not only am I not going to ask you to do any of the above, I expressly **forbid** it. Ed’s penis isn’t here. Ignore it. This is for **you**. The only reason I’m still naked is to make you feel more comfortable. I’m not naked because I want something from you, and I don’t care how hard my dick gets. And I don’t want you to, either.”

I still didn’t know what he was up to, but I was listening with rapt attention. “Now, remember two things. One is that you **need** this. You don’t know it yet, but you do. The other thing to remember is that you trust me. OK?”

“OK,” I whispered.

“Good. Now, you’re tense as all get-out. I need you to relax. Deep breaths. Big, deep, cleansing breaths. With every breath, you should feel your muscles get less tight. Go on, deep breaths.”

I did. He kept coaxing me, “breathe,” as I did. And, amazingly, it started **working**. “Breathe, Natalie. Relax,” he kept whispering in my ear in a low voice as I did, and I felt the tension draining from me. Unbelievable. He was actually making me relax. My back hadn’t felt this wonderful in **years**.

Then I felt his hand creep up and touch my breast. I immediately stiffened. What was he **doing**?

“None of that,” he whispered. “Don’t tense up. Relax. Breathe, in and out. You can do this.”

Relax? With his hand on my **boob**? Oh, God, I couldn’t...but he made me, just by being gentle and talking all the time. “Natalie. This is for you. This feels good. This is supposed to feel good. Relax. Breathe. Let it happen. Trust me. Let it happen. Relax.”

Oh, God, it was **working**. I kept breathing, and I felt the tension leave again. And I felt this wonderful **warmth** coming from where his hand was. Oh God, oh God, it felt **good**. And he kept whispering to me. Encouraging words, sweet words. “It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful,” he said. “Does this feel good?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Good,” he said. “Breathe. Relax. Let it feel good.” I did. We lie there for a few minutes as he fondled my boob. It felt wonderful. I still couldn’t believe it.

Then I felt his **other** hand. It was headed **lower**. Oh God, he was going to....I couldn’t let him do **that**? I **hated** that!

He was moving his hand slow enough for me to stop him—but he kept saying, “Breathe. Relax. Let it happen.” So, I let it happen. I don’t know how, I don’t know why. But, before I knew it, his hand was on my pussy. He was gently tracing his finger up and down my pussy.

And, oh God, I **liked** it!

“Relax,” he kept saying. “This feels good. This feels the best of all. Let it happen.”

His finger lightly traced up and down my pussy. I kept breathing deeply. I didn’t have a **choice** at that point. I was headed straight to **panting**.

Then I felt his finger slip inside. I tensed, for just a minute. Then, amazingly, I didn’t.

“Relax, Natalie,” he whispered. “This feels good. Don’t fight it.”

“Oh God I’m **not**,” I blurted out.

“Good,” he chuckled. And then his finger was all the way in.

He slipped it in and out. And I **liked** it! I don’t know what happened—if it was because I had been so relaxed, or if it was Ed, or if it was that I **trusted** Ed, or what. But this—what I had been avoiding and dreading and running away from for three days—I let it happen. And it felt good.

Part of my brain was just.... **stunned**. The other part of my brain, however, recognized a growing fire in the pit of my belly. Hey, I’m not stupid. I knew what was happening—intellectually. Not **all** my reading was for class. So I knew what was going on. It’s just that I had never **felt** it.

And then, the hand under me, the one that had been on my boob the whole time, slipped down—and went right for my clit.

That's when I lost it. Looking back—considering that, not too many hours ago, I had been wondering if I was frigid—I still can't believe what happened. I just went **nuts**. His hand on my clit made me gasp, and the fire in my belly built and built. And I found myself grabbing his other hand—the one with the finger up in me—and I humped myself on it. I had tilted a bit—I wasn't quite on my side, I was half on my back, my leg draped over Ed's—and I grabbed his hand and slammed my pussy on it, while his other hand rubbed furiously on my clit.

“Oh, God, ED?” I screamed—and went.

Like I said, I knew what an orgasm was. Intellectually, that is. I had read all the descriptions—your muscles clench, you spasm, yadda yadda yadda. I'd never read that your brain fries. My brain **fried**. It melted into a complete pile of spasming goo. I'd never read that your tummy feels like a star going supernova. Mine did. I'd never read that your pussy feels like the center of the universe. Mine did.

As I came down, desperately trying to catch my breath, I felt Ed's hands leave my pussy, and go back around my waist, as he cuddled me back to something approaching coherence.

Wow. Wow, wow, wow!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ED

I did it. Hallelujah. I fucking **did** it! It **worked**!

I'd given girls orgasms before. None ever seemed so important. Well, the three I gave Annie the one time we were together were just as important—but I didn't know that at the time. That was just in retrospect.

Damn, I wish I could get Annie out of my head!

But I couldn't. And here was Natalie, snuggling into me and humming. Uh-oh. I knew this would mean a lot to her—what I didn't count on was that it would mean so much to **me**.

“Ed?” she asked.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks,” she said quietly. “I can't thank you enough. That was above and beyond the call of a program partner.”

“All part of the service, ma'am,” I joked. “How do you feel?”

“Reborn,” she said simply. “That was my first, you know.”

“I figured,” I said. “I remember my first. Well, my first administered by someone other than myself, mind you.” She chuckled at that one. “Believe me, they’re **not** the same. Masturbating is fine—having someone **else** masturbate you is a whole different experience. I was in eighth grade—and I got taken behind the school building and jacked off. It was incredible.”

“Who was it?” she asked.

“Who do you think?” I smirked.

“Maggie Benson?” she asked.

“Got it in one. Half the male members of the junior class had their first experience with Maggie Benson, sometime between seventh and ninth grade.” She chuckled at that.

“Though she **didn’t** take my virginity.”

“Who did?”

“Marcia Ryerson. Which turned out to be a disaster. Unbeknownst to both of us, she was fucking Mike at the same time.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she said.

“Exactly. I should’ve just waited for Maggie to come along for that one, too. At least with Maggie, it’s just sex.”

“I thought you and Maggie were friends,” she said.

“We are. But that’s still different. I **like** sex with friends. It’s less messy, it’s always satisfying, and, at the end, we’re still friends. I’ve fucked Amanda—and that’s **since** she started going out with Jared. There’s no messy emotionalism. It’s just sex between two people who like each other.”

“Is that what this was?” she asked tentatively.

“Not quite,” I admitted. “To be honest, I didn’t know if this would work. That makes it quite a bit different right there. Plus, it was one-sided.” I was still hard as a rock.

“Ed, I could...” she started.

“No, you couldn’t. We discussed this. This was for **you**. I always have my right hand. Or Maggie Benson.” She laughed. “No obligations, no reciprocation. You needed this. I’ll live.”

“What did you mean that you didn’t know if it would work?”

“I didn’t know if you’d respond,” I said. “I didn’t know if you’d freeze up. I didn’t know if you’d turn on **me** for trying it. I didn’t know a lot of things. It was a chance.”

“If I didn’t trust you, it never would have,” she told me. “And, I must admit, you’re very good with that breathe deep and relax stuff. You had me so relaxed that I felt all the tension drain from my back.”

“Good. How do you feel now?”

“**Very** relaxed. Also starving,” she giggled.

“A bunch of the guys are headed to The Mariner.”

“That sounds heavenly,” she smiled up at me. So we went.

In the car, fully dressed, my mind went into overdrive. I don’t want to say I panicked, but what I had just done began to dawn on me. And Natalie was looking at me in undisguised adoration. Uh-oh.

What did **I** feel? I don’t know. What I do know was that, whatever it was, it was dangerous. Natalie was right—that **wasn’t** just a quick wank between friends. Like I said, it was more important than that. To **me**. Which was the **last** thing I needed.

When we got to the restaurant, Natalie huddled with the girls—Amanda, Lily, Emma, Maggie—at one end. While Jared, Ty, and Frankie discussed baseball, I saw an opportunity to huddle with Mike. I needed advice.

“Buddy, I’ve got a problem,” I told him.

“Shoot.”

“First, I found out about Natalie today.” I told him about what she had told me that morning. I don’t talk out of school, but there’s nobody more trustworthy than Mike Kirkland. Not with what his mother does for a living.

“Damn, that’s no good. You should get her to talk to Mom,” Mike said.

“I’m working on it. However, I tried to help her myself this afternoon.” And I told him what I had done.

“Hot damn, Ed!” he said. “It worked **that** well?”

“Mike, she went to pieces. Completely went to pieces. Frankly, it was beautiful to watch.”

“That’s great,” he said. “You took a helluva chance, pal, but you know what? I think Mom would approve.” Then he grinned. “Now I know why she’s been giving you those **looks** since we’ve been here.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and that’s the problem. I knew she needed this—what I didn’t know is what it would do to **me**.”

“This wasn’t just an act of friendship,” he said astutely.

“No, it was not. Not after I was done. And it **has** to be. I can’t go down **that** road again.”

“Ed, she’s not Annie,” Mike said quietly.

“Yes she **is**, dammit! Another wounded butterfly! And I’m getting my ass in deep again. When will I learn?”

“Ed. You like her. Admit it,” he pressed.

“Yes, I like her. And I need to **stop** liking her.”

“Why on earth?”

“Because down that road lies Annie!” I said exasperatedly. “If I get myself emotionally involved with Natalie, I’m going down the Annie road again. I can’t do that.”

“You already **are** emotionally involved,” he pointed out. “And so, my friend, is **she**.”

“I **know** she is,” I said. “But I **can’t** be.”

“Look, Ed,” he said. “You weren’t in love with Marcia Ryerson, I know that. I **was**. I mean, I had my heart stomped on just as you did. I don’t want to compare levels of pain, but it wasn’t fun.”

“Yeah, I knew all that,” I told him.

“And I still took a chance on Lily.”

I laughed. “Mike, I knew the **minute** I met Lily that she was your **dream** girl. Come on. Marcia Ryerson must’ve completely drained from your memory the minute you met her. Lily’s what you’ve wanted all along.”

“Ed, that’s what I’m trying to tell you,” he said. “I agree with everything you say, but I know you as well as you know me. Natalie is **your** dream girl.”

“If that’s true, why can’t I get Annie out of my head?”

“There’s a couple reasons,” he said. “One is that you really didn’t have closure with Annie—as my mother would say.” I chuckled at that. Ellie talked about “closure” all the time. “And that’s made worse,” Mike continued, “by the fact that Annie was one of your best friends long before you guys hooked up. You didn’t just lose a girlfriend, you lost a very close friend. Think about what you’d feel if Amanda walked out of your life, or me. It might not be the same, but it’d be almost as painful.”

“That makes some sense,” I said.

“There’s another reason,” he said. “But you’ll have to figure that one out for yourself.”

“C’mon, Mike, you’re the psychologist’s son, help me out!”

“I’m also your best friend, and I prefer not to hurt you.”

“The other reason would hurt me?” Mike nodded. “OK, so you told me that. Lay it on me. I need to hear it right now.”

Mike took a deep breath and said, “You brandish Annie like a shield. She’s like your own personal little war wound. I hate to say that, but it’s true. Look, I **know** that what you went through with her was incredibly traumatic. But it was two years ago. You can’t let go because you **wallow** in it. If that weren’t the case, you’d have answered one of her letters. Shit, you would’ve **opened** one of them.” I looked at him in shock. “If you answered her letters,” he continued, “you might **get** closure. But part of you doesn’t **want** that.” I just looked at him. “I’m sorry,” he finished.

“Don’t be,” I said. “I don’t know. If what you say is true, I’m not doing in consciously. I’m just not **ready**.”

“I understand that,” he said. “But if you don’t get yourself ready, you might be losing the second chance of a lifetime.” He looked at Natalie.

“I can’t. I just can’t,” I said pitifully.

“Suit yourself. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Just then, Natalie came up to me from the other end of the table. “It’s getting late. Can you get me home?”

“Sure.” She seemed tense all of a sudden. “Are you OK?”

“Fine,” she said with a smile that seemed forced. “Just tired. It’s been a long day.”

“That it has,” I agreed. “We can go.” We said goodbye to the gang and took off.

We were silent on the way to her apartment.

“Ed,” she said as we pulled up in front, “you get to school early, right?”

“Yeah. 30 to 45 minutes, usually.”

“Good,” she said. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Bye. And thanks.” And then, before I could say a word, she was gone.

She had a lot on her mind, it seemed—and I got the impression that she was going to show up early to school the next day to talk about it.

I had a feeling I knew what was on her mind. And it terrified me.

I had to get myself out of this, and right away. Before it got worse.

--End of part three--

ED AND NATALIE NAKED AT SCHOOL PART FOUR THURSDAY

CHAPTER TWELVE NATALIE

I haven’t ever been more confused than I was Wednesday night.

First, I told him everything. He understood, and said words I was dying to hear. Then he took me to his house and gave me the experience of my life. He wasn’t treating me like a friend. He was treating me as more than that. Honestly, I loved it. There was **something** between us—I could feel it, and thought he could, too.

Then I overheard part of what he said to Mike. Not all of it, but I heard “can’t get emotionally involved” and then I heard the name “Annie”.

And, then, on the ride home, he was noticeably distant from me.

I got home depressed. I tossed and turned myself into a fitful sleep. When I woke up, I was less depressed than I was angry.

Look, I said I was a ticking time bomb. And here **he** was, seemingly drawing me deeper into him—and then pushing me away. I saw what was coming—the big brush-off. Probably this morning. And I was so tired of people who I cared about letting me down.

As I walked to school, I calmed down a little bit. Ed's not an asshole. I knew that. He had a reason. What I needed to do was find out what it was, and see if I could get around it. But I was still—you know—peeved.

OK, I had fallen—and fallen **hard**. This guy was everything I ever wanted. Patient, kind, understanding, smart, loving, funny. And he even liked my kind of movies. He was a true and loyal friend. He was even cute. I had a little daydream in the car yesterday, on the way to the Mariner—before everything started to come apart. It was of he and I watching Casablanca in the dark, cuddled up under a blanket, snuggling—and then making mad love after it. I **NEVER** daydream about sex. I mean it. That was the first. The first time I ever thought of it as something potentially other than a disaster.

And, to be honest, I never dreamed about watching old movies with anyone other than my lonesome, either.

If he was going to wreck that daydream, I at least needed to know why.

I got to the parking lot, sat down, and waited. He pulled up in front of me a few minutes later. I walked right over to his car and got in.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi. We need to talk,” I said without preamble.

“I know. We do. Look, Nat, I don't think I can be who I think you want me to be.”

There it was—but I wasn't having it, not yet. I drew on my peevedness. “Yes, you can, but we'll talk about that later.” He looked at me in surprise. “That's not what I want you to talk about right now. This is what I want you to tell me: who's Annie?”

All the color drained from his face. “What?” he squeaked.

“I overheard you and Mike last night. It wasn't intentional, you were being loud at one point. I didn't hear a lot, but I heard you say you couldn't get emotionally involved—obviously talking about me—and then I heard the name Annie.” I took a breath. “Let's get it right on the table. I have strong feelings for you. And if you try to deny you have strong feelings for **me**, you're lying. If this Annie person is what's coming between us exploring those feelings, I have a right to know who she is. Look, Ed, you know how inexperienced I am. I've **never** felt this before. Do you know how hard it is for me to give in to it? And **you** refuse to—because of Annie. So, who's Annie?”

He took a deep breath. “OK. You do have a right to know.” Another breath. “Anna Magdalena Zipelski, if you want to get technical. Her dad, who died when she was five, was Polish,” he smiled. “Known by all as Annie; and known sometimes, by me, as Zippy—that was my pet nickname for her.” I giggled at that. He smiled, and then got serious again. “We met in middle school, sixth grade. She was immediately part of my regular crowd. The group that's **still** my regular crowd. We didn't know Jared well then, and Lily

didn't even live here—she lived in Boston until this past Christmas--but the rest of us were a gang even back then. Me, Mike, Amanda, Frankie, Maggie, Michelle Ingemi, a couple others. And, back then, Annie.”

“We were friends for three years. I told you what happened freshman year with Marcia Ryerson.” I nodded. “Well, after that, I guess Annie decided she wanted to comfort me. We got closer. About this time freshman year, I asked her out. She eagerly accepted.”

“The first two months were bliss, absolute bliss. She was cute, vivacious, outgoing, and we had a great time. As you'll find out, that was all a cover for some serious pain—but she dealt with pain differently than you do—she put on a happy face. I didn't know it was just a face at the time. In fact, maybe it wasn't—I think, for me anyway, it was genuine. Anyhow, we quickly discovered we were in love with one another, and it just got better. At the end of those two months, we made love for the first time. She was only my second. I was her first—so I thought at the time. I guess in any meaningful way, I really **was** her first. But I'm getting ahead of the story. Anyhow, we made love—and it was incredible. I talk about how much I like neat, unemotional sex with friends, but that's because I try to drive Annie out of my mind. I won't lie about it now—sex with Annie was glorious.”

“It was exactly three days after that that all hell broke loose. We were alone, and we were kind of fondling, when I tried to put my hand down her pants. She stopped me. Said we couldn't do that today. OK, that was fine with me, I figured she had her period, right? She told me later that she **thought** about telling me that she did—but, she said, in the back of her mind, she wanted someone to figure it out. So she told me, no, she wasn't on the rag. No, I hadn't hurt her three days ago. No, she actually **was** in the mood. So, why was she stopping me?”

“She told me she was stopping me because she didn't want my hand in her pussy when someone else's cum was in there.” I gasped at that. “Yeah, that's pretty much what I did. The world stopped. I thought I had another Marcia Ryerson. But I was wrong. I asked her, in a tone of horror, if she was cheating on me. And she looked at me with those big brown eyes and said, ‘Is it cheating if I don't have a choice?’”

“My stomach sunk to my toes, and I asked her—not really wanting to know the answer—whose cum was in her pussy. And she looked up at me and said, ‘Tom's’.”

“Tom was her **stepfather**.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “Her stepfather.....”

“Raped her,” Ed finished. “Repeatedly. When she finally got it all out, it turned out this had been going on since she was **twelve**. And she decided she couldn't live with it anymore. She needed an out. She needed to talk to someone. She had told her mother, but her mother hadn't believed her, or so she said. So, she trusted me, so she dumped it on me.”

“Oh, man,” I said. “First her, then me. You must feel like the King Dumpee.”

“That part I didn’t mind, not even from her,” he smiled. “I was furious, of course, and worried, and upset—but I’m **glad** she chose me to tell. I felt honored that she trusted me with it. You too,” he smiled at me.

I smiled back, but then got serious. “What did you do?”

“I convinced her to talk to Ellie, Mike’s mom. It took some doing, but I convinced her. She **knew** that going to Ellie—for something like **that**—meant it was going to have to be reported. She knew it would break up her family. That’s what had kept her from doing it for over two years. But she had had enough. She knew I’d insist she see Ellie.”

“She did, and Ellie reported it. The problem was, it was her word against his. And, we found out, the mother would back **him** up—turns out she knew all along, but turned her back. She **let** this monster abuse her daughter to keep her marriage together.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I said.

“That devastated Annie, worse than when she just thought her mother didn’t believe her. So, it was her word against theirs—and admitting she had made love with me didn’t help. But the cops, and Ellie of course, **did** believe her, so they did the best they could. The bastard had a set schedule of when he raped her, if you can believe that. So, they used her as bait. They caught him in the act.”

“He got arrested, as did the mother. Later on, both of them went to jail for a good long time. Anyhow, Annie got sent to foster care, and they found her a nice family here in town. For the next month, I spent most of my time holding her as she cried. I didn’t touch her other than that—didn’t seem like she was ready for that. I was just there for her as much as I could be.”

“That’s not the end of the story,” I said.

“No. After about a month, she came over to my house, and broke up with me. She said she needed to stand on her own two feet, she was leaning on me too much, that she needed to become independent. It made absolutely no sense to me. I tried to talk her out of it, but I couldn’t. I told her that I could back off, let her stand up for herself more, that I thought I was doing the right thing—but that, if I wasn’t, we could work it out. She said no, that it would never work, that I was too tied up in ‘rescuing’ her from her stepfather. She said she’d be eternally grateful to me for that, but she needed to get away from it.”

“Shortly thereafter, I heard she was going out with Rocco Santelli. Rocco was a **senior** when we were freshman—so, he was three years older. Plus, he was the male Maggie Benson of his class. You think **I** have a reputation as a pussyhound? Rocco was the king pussyhound. And my one true love was with **him**. I confronted her, and asked her why, and she said she just wanted to have fun. And I wasn’t fun, I was too bound up in pain.”

“Ed,” I interjected, “you said you guys had sex once and it was fantastic.” He nodded. “And after you found out about what had been going on **all along**, remember, you didn’t touch her. That time with you was probably the only time in her life she ever felt **good** about sex. And then you stopped touching her, and she wanted to be touched. She probably thought **you** thought she was dirty. Look, I know all about finally having a fantastic physical experience after a few brutal ones, after yesterday. That explains Rocco.”

“Yeah, and I know that **now**. But then, it didn’t make much sense.” He sighed. “Anyway, shortly after Rocco, she was taken in by her aunt and uncle—this is her late father’s sister and her husband—and she moved to Newburgh. And I haven’t seen her since.”

“You don’t even hear from her, or about her?” I asked.

“She writes me regularly, once a month. She started about four months after she left.”

“So, you do know how she’s doing.”

He looked down. “I’ve never opened one of her letters. I send them back return to sender. She keeps sending them, and I keep sending them back.” He looked up with a wan humorless grin. “It’s almost a habit by now.”

“Don’t you want to know?” I asked.

“Yes and no.”

“What if she wants you back?”

“There’s too much water under **that** bridge.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But you’re still carrying a torch for her.”

“No, I’m not,” he said. “I’m still carrying a hole in my heart. There’s a difference.”

“There’s not much of a difference if you’re the person trying to **fix** the hole,” I said bitterly. He looked at me in surprise. “Look, you don’t think I have holes in **my** heart? Come on. It’s riddled with them. You were betrayed by a girlfriend—I am continually betrayed by my **mother**. Look, what happened to Annie was horrific—and what she did to you, while explainable—she must have still been in shock and very confused—wasn’t nice, either. But you can’t keep doing this to yourself.”

I took a breath. “I recognize the need to heal my wounds. I also recognize the need for help doing so. I thought **you** were the person to help me. And, now that I know, I’d certainly be willing to help you as much as I’m able. Look, I understand part of what Annie said to you. I understand the need to stand on my own two feet. However, do you know how long I’ve **already** been doing that? I don’t want you to carry me. But I’d like someone—**you**—walking along side. I’d like a shoulder to lean on.”

“I’m not Annie. Ed, listen to me—I am **not** Annie! For one thing, I’m older, and better able to deal with things. For a second thing, what’s happened to me isn’t **nearly** as bad. For a third thing, I dumped my tale of woe on you before there was anything really between us—it was starting, it’s **still** starting, but it’s not like we’ve known each other for three years and been going out for two months. Do I feel gratitude towards what you’ve done? Of course I do. But that’s the gratitude for the **friendship** you’ve offered me. What happened in your bed last night—that wasn’t friendship. That was something more. And you **know** it.”

“You make me feel things I never thought I’d feel. That didn’t happen because I’m grateful, or because you’re a nice guy with a good Samaritan streak. It happened because there’s **something** between us! I was willing to explore it—I **wanted** to explore it. I daydreamed yesterday about having sex with you. I have **never** daydreamed about having sex, **ever**. More like nightmares. But I daydreamed about it with you.”

He was sitting behind the wheel of his car, looking at me in abject shock. “Look, this is the bottom line. What Annie did to you broke your heart. But if you don’t take a chance on us—because I **know**, that deep down in your heart, you **want** to—you’ll be breaking **my** heart. And my heart can’t take much more damage. Furthermore, if you’re really truthful with yourself, you’ll be breaking your **own** heart—which also has enough damage.”

“You need to think about that. You can take a chance, or you can bury your feelings. I know what I choose. I’m **sick** of burying my feelings. Maybe you should be, too.”

“It was two years ago, Ed. You can’t hide forever.”

With that, I opened the door and got out of the car, and walked away. Crying my ever-loving eyes out. He was still in the car. I’m not sure he could move.

As I walked away I felt....numb. And I was so **tired** of feeling numb. Look, that kind of outburst is **not** me. I was trying to shock him. I put things on the table I didn’t think I was capable of.

And I didn’t know if it would work. And if it didn’t?

I didn’t even want to **think** about that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ED

When she left the car I had two things running through my head.

The first was, “I can’t deal with this.”

The second was, “I can’t **believe** she had the guts to do that!”

I needed help. I needed Ellie.

Fuck school. I walked to Mike's house, meeting him at the door. "Hey, what's up?" he said.

"Is your Mom around, and does she have a client right now?"

"Yes and no," he laughed. "I don't think she has anyone today, I think she was going to work on her next book."

"You think she'd spare a minute for me?"

"Sure." He led me back in.

"Aren't you going to school?" Ellie said as we walked in to the kitchen.

"I am," Mike said, "But Ed needs to talk to you."

"You're a psychologist registered with the school, you can give me a note," I joked.

"Is this a business call?" Ellie said.

"Yeah," I admitted.

"Sit down," she said, pointing to the kitchen table. Mike said bye to us and took off. "You want a coke?"

"Yeah, Ellie, thanks."

She got me one, and one for herself, then sat down across from me at the table. "OK, Ed, what's on your mind?"

"There's this girl, my partner in the program. Natalie Weinberg."

"Mike's mentioned her. Says you've done a lot for her."

"Yeah, but things have gotten very complicated." I told her everything. Starting from Natalie's revelations yesterday morning, to what had happened yesterday afternoon, to what had been said today. She listened—interrupted once or twice with a question, but mostly listened. She was good at that.

"Oh, Eddie," she said with a sad smile when I was done, "you never get the easy ones, do you?"

"No, I leave those to Mike. The man with the ultimate in low-maintenance girlfriends," I laughed.

“Well, Lily’s a bit more high-maintenance than **that**. She needed reassuring that she could be accepted by a guy while still being a bit of a ‘guy’ herself. But, you’re right, outside of that, Lily’s pretty low-maintenance, from what I can see. There’s not a whole lot of angst in that relationship.” She looked at me. “But you wouldn’t ever be attracted by someone like Lily, would you?”

“Romantically? No, you’re right. Don’t get me wrong, Lily’s one of my five favorite people in the universe, but just as friends. I guess I like to be needed.”

“Natalie obviously needs you. Then what’s the problem?”

“The day when she **stops** needing me, and discovers nothing else is there. That’s my quandary. I’d be better off if I **were** attracted to Lily-types.”

“Is that all that’s there for **you**?” she asked. “Her needing you?”

“No. Hell, Ellie, she’s an old film buff! Do you know how cool **that** is? The first time I touched her, I didn’t tell you about, we were just cuddling. It was Tuesday night. You know what I was doing? Showing her *Singing In The Rain*, which she’d never seen. And there’s more. There’s a lot more—she’s kind and sympathetic herself, despite her upbringing. She’s got a fire that comes out, I saw it this morning. I was sitting listening to her diatribe, and found myself liking her **more**. She’s smart as a whip. And—I’ll admit it—there’s a definite physical attraction there. No, it’s not just that she needs me.”

“Then why do **you** think that what **she** feels is only need?” she asked, and then waved her hand. “That’s a stupid question. Annie.”

“Annie,” I agreed.

“Ed, let me ask you a question. Two years down the road, do **you** think all Annie had for you was need?”

“No. Hell, we were going out for two months—and friends long before that—before any of the shit hit the fan, you know that.”

“I wonder if Annie now realizes that,” she said. I looked at her. “Look, I think, at some point Annie **did** realize that. It was too late, of course, but Annie had to have known, deep down in her heart, that there was more to her feelings for you than that. She got confused at the moment, is all. I know what she told you, that you were too bound up in it. That’s valid for a fifteen-year-old at a moment of extreme pain like the one she was living in.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.

“The point is that Annie made a **mistake**. **You** know it. I watched you two and **I** know it. And I’d bet the proceeds from my latest book that, sometime in the last two years, **she**

figured it out. She made a mistake. And you've spent the last two years haunted by **her** mistake."

"Ed, what happened to you and Annie **wasn't** your fault. It wasn't because you're too kind, or too generous, or too much of a good Samaritan. It wasn't because you did anything wrong. It was because a young girl living through utter **hell** made a **mistake**. That's all it was."

"Look, she boiled down your relationship to one of simply need after you found out, because she was confused. She probably **did** rely on you too much in those weeks—which made her more confused. Remember what she was going through. Remember the look on her face the day she found out her mother was in on the whole thing. If dumping you was the biggest mistake she made—she did OK for someone going through what she was going through. I know that doesn't help **you** much," she said with a sympathetic smile.

"But I saw you two **before** that happened. That was genuine love, from both sides. She forgot that afterwards—but, like I said, that was **her** mistake."

"So, Ed, tell me—**why** would you think Natalie would make the same exact mistake? And, furthermore, after what she said to you this morning, why on **earth** would you **ever** think that?"

Wow. Did I say she was good, or what?

"And furthermore, from what you tell me, I think—despite the fact that she's got some serious shit going on—that Natalie has a pretty good head on her shoulders. Keeping her nose to the grindstone in school shows some gumption and maturity and good smarts. Annie, at **that** point in time, did **not** have a good head on her shoulders. You know that, and you know why. Natalie's right, Ed—she's **not** Annie. Don't expect her to make Annie's mistakes."

"And as for **you**, Ed Bauer—you're my second son. I've known you since you were eight years old. Be **happy**, would you please? You haven't been happy since Annie, not really. Oh, I know, Mr. Jokes and all. And I know you adore your friends, and you adore your family, and you have a good social life and great hobbies and all. But you're not truly happy. I of all people can see that."

"Ed, you're a trusting soul. That's who you **are**. You can't **stop** trusting people because one person abused that trust—especially when that one person was very young and not in her right mind. Don't go looking for trouble where none exists."

I sat there and thought about that one for a minute. Then I got up and hugged her.

"Ellie, you're the smartest person in the universe, you know that?"

"You flatterer."

“That was no Eddie Haskell moment, that was genuine,” I grinned.

“So, it made sense, then?” she asked.

“Ellie, you **always** make sense. What I’m going to **do** with your good sense is the question.”

“Oh, you’ll figure it out. And I think you’ll do the right thing. Now, here, let me write you a note so Mr. Tilling doesn’t have a heart attack.”

She wrote me the note, and I got myself back to school. Went to see Mr. Tilling. He took the note—and looked at the reason with surprise.

“You having problems, Ed?” he asked.

“Needed someone to talk to, and Ellie’s the best.”

“Does this have anything to do with the uncomfortable position I put you in?” he asked.

“Somewhat,” I smiled. “But don’t worry about it. I think it’s going to work out.”

“Good.” He gave me a note to get into class. “Get going.”

I did—accounting had already started. I gave the teacher the note, and he waved me to my seat.

“Where have you been?” Natalie whispered as I sat down.

“Just something I had to take care of,” I whispered back. The teacher shot us a look, so we quieted down.

Natalie pretty much avoided me after that. She didn’t say much in the classes we shared. She ate lunch with us, but planted herself down the table from me with the girls.

I thought, all day, about what Ellie said. Did I have the guts to do this?

Anyhow, we got out of school, and went for our clothes at the entrance. She started walking away and I grabbed her.

“Listen, would you come to the baseball game?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I’d like to talk afterwards,” I told her.

“Look, Ed, I said all I have to say this morning.”

“I don’t know if I did,” I replied.

She drew herself up and stared into my eyes. “There’s only one thing you have to say, Ed Bauer. Yes or no. I can’t **do** this. I don’t have the strength. I poured my heart out at you today, I can’t do it again. There’s nothing to talk about. Yes, or no, that’s all.”

“But, I don’t know if...” I started.

“That’s the problem! I can’t deal with you not knowing! If you’re going to break my heart, get it over with already!” She was almost frantic, and we were being stared at. She took a breath and calmed down. “Yes or no, Ed. I told you what I want. I told you what I need. Yes or no. That’s all you have to say. Yes, or no.”

Make a fucking decision, Ed, I said to myself. And you know what the only true decision is. So, I took her hands in mine, and said, “Yes, goddammit, yes! Yes!” She looked at me in utter shock. I laughed. “I don’t even know what the **question** is, but if you’re asking, then it’s yes. OK? Yes.” And then I kissed her. “Yes.” I only wish I had a camera to take her picture then. I kissed her again. Then I dropped her hands. “I have to go play baseball,” I said with a grin. And then I headed for the field, leaving her standing there.

Standing there in utter shock. But I saw, as I disappeared around the corner, the beginnings of a stunned smile forming on her lips.

Ellie’d be proud of me. **I** was proud of me. I was also terrified. But I couldn’t say no. I just couldn’t.

Thank God for baseball. I needed something else to think about for the next two hours.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN NATALIE

Oh my God.

Did what I think just happened **really** happen?

I couldn’t believe I had done what I just did. I stood up for myself. I practically **attacked** him—verbally—and didn’t back down. In front of a whole parking lot full of people!

And he said **yes**.

Oh God.

I felt...giddy. **Me. Giddy**, of all things. And tingly. Oh God.

I headed towards the baseball field. I couldn't go home and leave things like **this**. Bought a ticket, went in. It was just then that it dawned on me that I was still nude. I really **was** getting used to this. Whatever, I had to be nude here, anyway.

I wandered through the stands in a stupor. I found Jared and Amanda and sat down next to them. Obviously, I had a dazed look on my face, because Amanda said, "Hi, Natalie. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. Better than that." I grinned at them. "I think I just asked Ed to go out with me. And I think he just said yes."

"You **think**?" Jared said, amused.

"It wasn't your normal conversation." I told them about what Ed had told me before school.

"Yeah, I knew all about Annie," Amanda said. "And I knew it still affected him."

"Well, I guess I lit into him a little bit," I admitted.

"You **did**?" Amanda said, surprised.

"Yeah. I was mad. I thought we really had a chance at something, and I thought he was going to blow it. So I told him, don't be an idiot. Then, after school, when he said he wanted to talk some more, I told him that I was all talked out, and the only thing I wanted to hear him say was yes or no." I blushed. "He said yes." I laughed. "I'm not sure **either** of us knows **exactly** what he said yes **to**, mind you—I was just winging it in the parking lot—but he said yes all the same."

"That's great. And funny," Amanda laughed. "I'm happy, for both of you. Well, as soon as you figure out what 'yes' means."

"I think we both have an idea," I grinned. "I amazed myself. I didn't think I had that in me."

"You've changed a lot in the past four days," Jared said. "The program will do that."

"Yeah, who woulda thunk it?" I laughed.

Amanda looked at me, suddenly serious. "I can't help this, Natalie. I have to say this. I knew Annie, she was **my** friend, too, back then—and Ed was one of my very best friends even then. I saw the whole thing from beginning to end." She took a breath. "And, I apologize, I **have** to say this. If you rake him over the coals, I will hunt you down and kill you."

I was taken aback by that, for a minute. She was dead serious. Then it dawned on me, just what that meant. And I said it. "Ed's a lucky guy to have such good friends," I smiled.

And I meant it. Nobody was telling **him** not to rake **me** over the coals. Not that I thought for a second he **would**. But he really was lucky.

Amanda blinked, and grinned. “I thought you’d get mad at me. I just, you know, saw what he was like....”

“I know,” I told her. “Look, it’s OK. I’m not mad. Look, I don’t know what the future holds. I think Ed and I are still figuring out what the **present** holds. But I’m not going to rake him over the coals. I promise.” I thought for a minute. “Yesterday morning, I told Ed a few things about myself. Has he told either of you any of it?” They both said no. “I’m pretty sure he told Mike, and I’d expect that. I can’t do it myself again, but I’ll tell Ed he can say anything he wants to the two of you. And, if you know certain things about me, you might realize how hard this is for me. You also might realize that Ed means far more to me than either of you realize. You know **his** past, so you know how far out on the limb he went by saying yes to me.”

“Right,” Amanda said. “That’s why I’m a bit worried.”

“And I don’t blame you. What you don’t know is I went right **off** the limb.”

“OK,” she said. “I’ll take your word for it. I know you had some serious problems, but I don’t know what they were. But that’s fine.” She grinned. “I saw how you were looking at Ed last night. That’s quite a reassurance.”

“Was I really?” I laughed.

“You were glowing,” Jared laughed.

“Oh, that. Well, yeah, OK, some of it was just general glowing at him. But the glowing was partially post-orgasmic. And my very first, at that.”

“WHAT?” Amanda said, amazed and grinning. “You and Ed....”

“With his hand,” I pointed out.

“You’re kidding. I’ve seen you in the halls when guys’ hands go down there,” Amanda said.

“Yeah. And that was Ed’s idea. I had told him, earlier, that I trusted him. So he decided to take matters into his own hands, so to speak,” I giggled. “He took me to his bedroom, made me lie down on his bed with him, and spooned behind me. He started with his hands around my waist, and he kept telling me to breathe deep and relax. And it worked, which shocked the daylights out of me. And when I was nice and relaxed, he moved his hands from around my waist. And moved them other places. And he kept whispering encouraging words.” I grinned. “And a few minutes later I was **very** relaxed.”

“Wow,” Amanda said. Then she looked at me. “But that’s not the whole attraction, I hope.”

“Of course not,” I said. “It’s **part** of it, I won’t deny it. Hey, you’ve told me straight out that you’ve had multiple partners but nobody compares to Jared, right?”

“Not by a long shot,” she grinned.

“Look, I’ve never been able to abide **anything** from **anybody**—not even touching. And Ed made me cum. He made me cum because he got me to relax. He got me to relax because I **already** trusted him—and already had some feelings for him.”

“Ah,” Amanda said. “That makes perfect sense. So, if Jared had tried that trick.....”

“It wouldn’t have worked, I don’t think. And I **like** Jared. But I think I still would’ve been too tense. Well, yesterday, anyhow. After Ed opened the floodgates, all bets are off.” Amanda cracked up laughing. “When the guys were feeling me up today—well, I almost enjoyed it. Not quite, but I wasn’t filled with revulsion like I had been. And **this** while I was preoccupied with my talk earlier with Ed.”

Just then, the team came out on the field. Ed looked over, and waved at Jared and Amanda, and then spotted me. He came over to the stands. “Hey! I didn’t think you were coming.”

“I changed my mind,” I grinned at him. “You’re right, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, I guess we do. Uhm, did you just ask me out?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I laughed. “Did you just say yes?”

“I’m pretty sure I did,” he grinned.

“Good,” I laughed. “Go play baseball. We’ll talk after.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he grinned, and shuffled off to his position at third base.

I had watched them play Tuesday, but I think I paid more attention today. I knew little about baseball, but Jared and Amanda helped me keep up. One thing they told me was that Mike and Ed were the leaders of the team—in fact, they were the co-captains. Actually, I think I would’ve figured that out even if I hadn’t been told. Ed took charge. Mike did, too.

Of course, Ed’s **never** completely all business. He was yelling jokes at Frankie, who was pitching today, the whole time Frankie was trying to warm up.

Like I said, I didn't know much about baseball, but even I could see, after watching Lily pitch on Tuesday, the difference between her and Frankie. Frankie threw much slower. He got them out, though.

Jared had told me that the coach had changed their batting order late last week. Lily had been batting 9th, and Ed 8th, but they were hitting so well the coach had moved them up. What was funny was that the five of them I knew, the five that hung around together, were all batting one after the other. The first hitter was the second baseman, who I didn't know, but then it went Lily second (she was in center field today), Mike third, Ty fourth, Ed fifth, and Frankie sixth. And, in the first inning, they were a well oiled **machine**, even I could see that. The second baseman walked, then Lily hit a single, sending him to third. Mike hit a double, both the second baseman and Lily scored. Ty walked. And then Ed hit a home run. He even pointed to me as he rounded third! They had sent five batters up, and were winning five to nothing.

I was really enjoying myself, then I decided to do something. Ty had challenged me when we were talking in the shower on Tuesday. And I'd taken him up on the challenge, but hadn't done anything about it. Now, getting some ideas, I reached into my bookbag and withdrew my sketchbook.

"What's that?" Amanda asked.

"Sketchbook," I said simply.

"You draw?"

"Yeah."

"Cool!" she said with enthusiasm. Why was I scared to do this before? Man, the things I've learned about myself—and other people—this week continued to astound me.

Anyhow, I got my pencils out, and went to an open page. One good thing about my drawing is I'm **fast**. That would be a good thing when you're trying to draw something non-stationery.

I focused on Frankie first. A pitcher going through his windup was an interesting visual item. So I watched him go through his windup a few times, then started sketching. I got a good one of him just uncoiling from his leg kick, his arm just stretching out behind him, his leg just starting towards the plate.

Next, I saw Ty at bat. He's an imposing figure, so I thought he'd be interesting to draw. Plus, he faced me, unlike most of the other batters. (Ed told me later that he hits lefty, that's why. Hey, what do I know?). I got him standing there, bat over his shoulder, waiting for the pitch, glaring out at the pitcher.

Then I went for Ed. Of course I did, right? I got him in his position at third base, half in a crouch, ready for a ball to be hit to him. I found out that drawing a baseball player nude, with nothing more than shoes and a jockstrap, was harder than sketching in the uniform!

After that, I noticed a couple of good non-action ones. Those were harder—Frankie went through his windup repeatedly, as did Ty with his batting stance or Ed with his fielding. If I saw a good “snapshot”, I had to do a very basic sketch quickly—before they moved—and then fill it in. The first one was Mike and Lily standing next to one another in the on-deck circle. (Jared told me what it was called!) They had their backs to me. Lily was holding her bat over her shoulder, and Mike was leaning on his. They were looking at each other, grinning.

The next one also involved Mike. He was standing on the mound with Frankie. This I got from the side view—Frankie, hands on hips, looking down at Mike, who was grinning, his mask perched on his head.

Finally, I got one of Ed batting. Which was interesting, since he had his back to me and was naked. I made sure to draw the tush really well!

As the game was winding down, I closed my sketchbook.

“Can I see?” Amanda asked.

Can you see what? My soul? I didn’t show my stuff to **anyone**. “Sure,” I said, somehow, and handed her the sketchbook. And then held my breath.

“These are **great!**” she enthused. “I can’t believe you did all these so quickly.”

“I **love** this one,” Jared said, looking over her shoulder, pointing to the one of Mike and Lily.

“And look, the bird’s-eye view of Ed’s naked batting tush,” Amanda giggled. “Natalie, these are fantastic. You’ve got talent.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Hey, what are you looking at?” It was Ed. He, and Lily, Mike, Frankie, and Ty were all at the stands. The game had just ended.

“Your new girlfriend’s talent, that’s what I’m looking at,” Amanda grinned.

“Really? Can I see?” Ed asked. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, I guess. I handed the sketchbook to Ed. They all took turns looking at it.

“Wow! These are **really** good!” Lily enthused.

“Yeah, you made Frankie look like an actual pitcher,” Ty teased.

“Yeah? Well look at you. She got that patented Christopher glare down pat. You look like you want to eat the opposing pitcher for lunch.”

“I love this one of me and Lily. Very candid,” Mike said.

“I like the one of Ed’s ass,” Lily said impishly.

“Well, of course. Who can go wrong with Ed’s ass?” said Ed. “I like the fielding one myself. She got me in my crouch just right.” He handed the sketchbook back to me. “You have **talent**.”

I blushed, I know I did. “I just wish I had thought of this in the first inning. I would’ve gotten your home run trot,” I teased.

“They’re fantastic,” Lily said.

“Can we have them?” Ed asked.

“What?” I said, stunned.

“They’d look great on the locker room wall,” he said.

“That’s a **great** idea,” Lily said. “Though that might be too much to ask. My best friend in Boston was a painter, and she was loath to let her stuff out of her sight.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Nat,” Ed said. “If it makes you uncomfortable, then it’s OK.”

“No. No it doesn’t. Look, this is the first time **anyone** has **ever** seen my stuff. I’m flattered to the point of being stunned. You really want these to hang in the locker room?”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “We really do.”

“Then, here.” I handed over the sketchbook. “Just tear them out carefully, there’s no perforation. And I need the sketchbook back, there’s plenty of empty space in there!”

“You got it,” Ed said. Then he kissed me. “Be back in a while.”

I just sat there and glowed. Until Lily came back out very quickly, still in uniform. “Natalie. Follow me.” I looked at her, puzzled, and she just waved at me. I went down the stairs, and followed her into the dugout, and then through. We turned a corner, and suddenly, I was in the team locker room. Which was full of guys in various stages of undress! Lily took me to the coach.

“Coach, this is Natalie.”

He looked at me. “**You** did those?” He pointed at a wall. It was a bare wall, at the end of a row of lockers, directly across from the door. In other words, when you entered the locker room, this wall was the first thing you saw. Hanging there were my drawings.

“Yeah.”

“More!” the coach said. “Can you do more?”

“Uhm, yeah, I can. When I come to a game, I can do more. Sure.” There was a lump in my throat.

“They are fantastic! They really brighten this dump up. If you want to do more, we’ve got plenty of space on that wall.”

“Uhm, yeah, if you want.”

“I want. Hey, guys!” he shouted. “This is the artist. She’s gonna do more!”

All I heard were shouts of “yeah!” and “great!” and “draw me!” I might have been embarrassed if I wasn’t **glowing** so much. Ed walked by, kissed my forehead, and said, “Look at that. You’re a hit.” I could only grin.

“There’s one problem,” Lily pointed out. “You didn’t sign ‘em.”

“Should I?”

“Of course you should,” Lily said. Ed agreed. The coach heard this, and went into his office, coming out with a pencil.

What to sign, though? I decided on just “Natalie” in simple script, small, in the corner. They all applauded when I was done.

Back sitting in the stands, I couldn’t believe it. How much can one person’s life change in just one **week**?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ED

What a day. I was still reeling as I left the locker room.

I got Natalie, and told her, “We’re headed to the Burger Hut. We can go, or we can bow out if you want to talk.”

“No, we can go. We can talk in the car. And afterwards, if we have to.”

“OK.” I waited while she got dressed. As we walked to my car, I put my arm around her and told her,

“You took a hell of a chance this afternoon.”

“Don’t think for a minute, despite all my goading, that I don’t know how big of a chance **you** took by saying yes.”

I frowned a bit. “Natalie, I’m not going to lie to you. I said yes because I **had** to. If I told you I wasn’t terrified, I’d be lying. But I couldn’t say no. My feelings for you are too strong.” By then we were at my car. I opened the passenger’s side for her, closed it, then climbed in myself. I put the keys in, but didn’t start it right away. “You know I was late for second period?”

“Yeah.”

“I was late for school. After our talk this morning, I left.”

“Where did you go?” she asked.

“I went to see Ellie. I was so confused, and needed someone to talk to, and Ellie’s the best there is. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind,” she smiled. “What did she say?”

“Common sense things. Things I should’ve realized myself. Ellie’s good at that—getting right to the crux of a problem.” I sighed. “She told me to stop blaming myself for Annie. She said that while Annie had a good excuse, **she** was the one that made a mistake. **She** was the one that convinced herself that our relationship was all about need and gratitude, when it was never just that. And, yeah, she had an excuse—she was in hell at the time. But Ellie pointed out that it was **her** mistake—and I why was I sitting there waiting for **you** to make the same mistake?”

“Did that make sense to you?” she asked.

“Yeah. Look, I’ve spent the past two years thinking that Annie left because I smothered her. It’s kind of an easy thing for me to do. What Ellie saw—and she was **there** the whole time, don’t forget—was something completely different. It was Annie panicking.”

“From what you’ve told me, I agree,” she said. Then she looked down. “Look, Ed, I don’t usually put it this way, but, let’s face it—I’m neglected. My mother could have been put away for parental neglect quite some time ago.” She looked up at me with a little smile. “I think it would almost be impossible for you to smother me.”

“Oh, no it wouldn’t,” I laughed. “But, at least, I think you’d tell me before it got too out of hand.”

“Yeah, I would,” she agreed. “I’m neglected, and I’m needy, and I’m a lot of other things. But I’m **not** panicking. And I’m **not** in hell. Heck, maybe.” I had to laugh at that. “What’s

happened to me doesn't **compare** to what happened to Annie. I'm not that far gone. I won't make any stupid mistakes out of panic, and I won't clam up on you. I promise."

"I know," I said. "I trust you. Imagine that."

"Funny, I think I said just about the same thing to you yesterday," she pointed out.

"You did," I laughed, and started the car. I drove out of the parking lot, and said, "Where on earth, by the way, did you get the gumption to do what you did today? This morning **and** this afternoon?"

"I was pissed off at you," she said. Then, very softly, "I'm sick of people letting me down. I thought you were going to."

"I was going to. Until you knocked some sense into me. And Ellie whacked me with the follow-up."

"Look," she said hesitantly. "I goaded you, badly, this afternoon. Are you sure you're all right with this? If you need more time to think...."

"No, I don't need more time to think," I smiled.

"What did you think you were saying 'yes' to?"

"You. I was saying yes to you. The rest is just details." There. I admitted it. And she just **beamed** at me. By that time, we were at the Burger Hut.

We went in—she was still beaming, and holding my hand—and got our food, then joined the gang. It was fun. And, yeah, everyone had kind of figured out that something was going on between us.

Afterwards, we got back in the car.

"I'd love to extend this evening, but I can't. I have homework that **has** to get done tonight," she said with a sigh.

"That's fine. Raincheck? Tomorrow?"

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Chinese food and something old and romantic on the TV."

"Oh, you **do** know the way to my heart," she grinned.

"Oh, wait a minute, that reminds me! Since we're going out now....look, this is awfully short notice, but what's Saturday?" She looked at me blankly. "The junior prom!" I said.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot, because I hadn’t planned on going.”

“I was going stag, but I’d rather go with you.”

“Can you still get tickets?” she asked.

“Yup. You can get them at the door. What do you say?”

“I’d love to,” I beamed. “Oh, wait, though, that doesn’t give me much time to find a dress, does it?”

“Uh, Natalie, honey, you won’t be needing a dress.” She looked at me blankly. “Program week runs through Sunday night for all school-sponsored activities.”

She looked at me, then her eyes got wide. “Do you mean to tell me you just asked me to go to my junior prom in the **nude**?”

“Well, I’ll be in the nude, too, if that helps any.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she hissed. “OK. Fine. I’ll do it.” She grinned. “Tell me something—when you walked into Mr. Tilling’s office and saw that petrified girl slumped in the corner, did you **ever** think you’d talk her into a naked junior prom trip?”

“Not in a million years,” I grinned. “I’m glad I did, though.”

“Yeah, me too,” she admitted. We were at her place, and I parked the car. I started walking to her apartment. We got to her door, and I was about to kiss her goodnight, when we heard, “NATALIE! THAT HAD BETTER BE YOU!”

“Oh, shit, why isn’t she in work?” she moaned. She opened the door, and there was her mother, drunk again.

“I thought you worked tonight.”

“Called in sick,” she slurred.

“Yeah, the ol’ vodka bottle flu,” she whispered to me.

“Where have you been?” her mother demanded.

“Out. With Ed. He’s my boyfriend now. So I’ll be out a lot from now on.”

“You’ll go out when I say you go out,” she yelled.

“Nope. Not any more. Sorry, Mother, I’m not playing the dutiful slave any more. For the first time ever, I have something. I have a boyfriend, I have friends—I have a life. I plan to live it. And you can just stay out of my way.”

“YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE BITCH!” she screamed.

That’s when Natalie **lost** it. “Ungrateful? What exactly should I be grateful for? The chance to pick up your empty vodka bottles? The fine, upstanding example you’ve set for me? The chance to have one of your loser slimeballs from Doc’s try to look down my nightie in the morning? The chance to cook your meals, do your laundry, clean your house? Or maybe I should be grateful for all those marvelous ‘dates’ you arranged for me with thirty-year-old men. Or maybe it’s the beatings. Or maybe ignoring everything about me that’s important. What should I be grateful for? Tell me.”

The mother boiled over. “WHY YOU....” she yelled, and charged—as well as a drunk person can charge—right at Natalie from across the room. I’m a tall guy, but I can move. By the time she got to where Natalie **had** been standing—Natalie was behind me, and the mother was looking up at **me**. In shock.

“Uh-uh, no more of that,” I said. “From now on, you want to hit Natalie, you get to go through **me** first. And if I hear about you hitting her when I’m **not** here, you’ll really be in trouble.”

“WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” she bellowed.

“Who am I?” I said. “I am, apparently, the **only** person in this room that cares about Natalie. And I’m just her boyfriend. She’s your **daughter**. And you don’t care a damn thing about her. It’s pathetic.” The mother didn’t know what to say to that, so I turned back to Natalie. She was looking at me—and the things on her face! Affection, awe—and gratitude. Lots of gratitude.

And I saw that, and didn’t get the Annie twinge. Imagine that. Thanks, Ellie. And Mike. And Natalie herself.

“Look, if you need to, you can stay at my place tonight,” I told her. “My parents won’t mind. And if you’re uncomfortable sharing a bed with me, you can sleep in my sister’s room.”

“No, that’s OK,” she grinned. “I **wouldn’t** want to stay in your sister’s room if I did that, and I **don’t** think I’d get any homework done,” she said with a twinkle. “It’s OK. Look at her, you scared the shit out of her.” The mother had returned to her chair, drinking more and grumbling to herself. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’d better be.” I leaned over and kissed her, nice and long. “You have my phone number.”

“I do, but I’ll be fine. See you tomorrow.” I gave her another quick kiss and went out the door. But I stayed and listened. I heard “Goodnight mother,” followed by more drunken grumbling, followed by Natalie’s bedroom door closing.

Satisfied, I walked back out to my car and drove home—happy. Imagine that.

--End of part four--

ED AND NATALIE NAKED AT SCHOOL
PART FIVE
FRIDAY

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
NATALIE

I woke up Friday morning feeling like a whole new person.

Mother was still passed out. Good. I didn't want to deal with her. I left her a note. It said that I had a date tonight, didn't know when I was coming home, and I didn't care what she thought about it.

Then I went to school. Something dawned on me on the way, which made me want to do something—but I had to run it by Ed.

He was already there. I got in his car. He beamed and gave me a huge kiss.

That's something that had crept up on me the past couple of days. Kissing is nice. I hadn't done much of that.

"Ed, I have something I'd like to discuss with you. And, unfortunately, I'm afraid it's going to hit you right square in your insecurities."

"Uh-oh," he chuckled. "What's up?"

"Today's our last day in the Program." He nodded. "And I'm going to get, you know—grabbed. And I wanted to try and see if I could relax and enjoy it," I admitted. "I want to find out if it's just you."

"Does it matter if it's just me?" he asked.

"Yes." He shot me a look. "But not for the reasons you're thinking. **Damn** I knew this was going to hit you the wrong way!"

He smiled. "OK. Look, I'm not going to jump the gun. This time, **I** will relax and you can explain it to me. You know what I'm thinking. Why do you care, are you looking for something better, blah blah blah. So, I'll just shut those stupid thoughts up and let you explain it to me."

I had to laugh. “It is **not** that. It’s just for my own personal knowledge. Look, Ed, we’re young. A lot can happen.”

“You mean I might get hit in the head with a line drive and get amnesia and forget how to make you cum, and you’d need a substitute?” he grinned.

I just burst out laughing. “You goof!”

“Seriously, no, I understand what you mean.”

“And not just that,” I continued. “This is my last chance to enjoy The Program. Most people have. I have in **some** ways, but not in **that** way. I’d like to see if I’m capable of it.”

“Go for it,” he said. “I want to see you get so worked up you need to ask for relief.”

“NEVER!” I blurted. He just laughed. “Have you?”

“A couple times. I did it in other classes, ones we don’t have in common. Two or three times.”

“I’ve seen it before, but tend to look away,” I admitted. “I just didn’t want to know.”

“The best one I ever saw was in bio,” he grinned. “But you weren’t in that class in September, were you?”

“No, I had to change my schedule around at the beginning of October, because my English class was too remedial.”

“How’d **you** get stuck in a remedial class?” he laughed.

“Computer glitch, what else?”

“Ah,” he said. “Anyhow, first week of the program, Jared and Amanda did each **other**. With their hands, as an experiment Ms. T had set up. One of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen. Found out later that that is when they figured out they were in love with each other.”

“That’s so sweet,” I said. “It’s time.”

“Yeah.” He leaned over and kissed me again, then opened his door. I got out of mine. We walked up to the entrance where everyone was gathered for the undressing. I had dreaded it every day. And it had affected Ed—he was too busy watching out for me to be his Ed self. So, as we walked up to it, I whispered in his ear, “It’s our last time doing this. Make it fun.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I smiled.

He grinned at me and bounded up the stairs. “Now batting, the third baseman, number 18, Ed Bauer!” Everyone cheered. Ed started taking off clothes. I sat on the wall at the entrance and just watched him. “Ed is batting .338, with 4 homers and 12 runs batted in early on here in the season.” More clothes shed. “Ed also sports quite a set of biceps, firm washboard abs, a luscious tushy, and an eleven-inch woody.”

Everyone laughed—and I couldn’t resist. I just couldn’t. I blurted out, “Eleven inches? Yeah, in base **two**, maybe!”

He looked at me in shock, and then burst out laughing. “You’re challenging **me** for the king of quips? Don’t quit your day job, sweetie.” He grinned at me. “Your turn.” I grinned back, stood up, and started working on my blouse. “Now we have the lovely and talented Natalie Weinberg,” he went on. “I don’t know what number’s on the back of her shirt, but I **do** know there’s too many buttons on the **front** of it.” I looked up and smirked at him, and just kept working on the buttons. “Natalie is sporting—what are those, 36 D’s?”

“Good guess,” I grinned.

“I’m good,” he grinned back. “Anyhow, Natalie is sporting a set of 36 D boobs, a firm yet voluptuous ass, and legs that won’t quit. Stats? She’s ranked seventh in the junior class.” I looked at him in surprise. He just grinned back. Then I realized there were ‘oooohs’ running through the crowd. “That’s right, folks, she’s a genuine brain. Which you should have figured out, right? I mean, she made a joke, and it was a geeky **math** joke!” Everyone howled at that, even me. “So, she’s got brains **and** that body. How can you go wrong?” God, he was embarrassing me! But I told him to have fun, right? And, you know what—it was fun, even with the extreme embarrassment. “So, here we are, our last day in the program,” he said after I had finished stripping. “But, don’t fret, very soon, we’ll be starring in our very own motion picture. It’s going to be called Beauty and the Third Baseman. Toodleoo!” And he led me through the doors.

OK, I couldn’t stop grinning. What a nut.

He grabbed my hand and turned to me, grinning, and said, “Base **two**? You really know how to hurt a guy.”

I laughed, and said, “OK. Base six?”

“What would eleven be in base six?” he asked.

“Seven.”

“OK, that’s just about right,” he grinned. “I don’t think Lily was out there for that. You’ll have to tell her the base two crack. She’ll love it.”

“Make it grow, make it grow, make it grow,” I sang softly with an impish smile.

“Oh, you just wait. I’m looking at your naked tits. It’ll grow soon enough,” he said with a leer.

I have to admit, that sent a shiver down my spine!

“Ed, I’m kind of amazed that you’ll take joking about that. I just blurted it out, and felt bad afterwards until you laughed. Most guys get all defensive about that.”

“Hey, I’m average. I know it. But it works fine, and I don’t get many complaints with how I wield it, so who cares?”

Damn, I wanted him to wield it on **me**! Jesus Christ.

“Believe me, I know I’m average,” he continued with a laugh. “I’ve seen Jared Wicklow naked.”

“Oh my God, so did I on Tuesday,” I giggled. “How did he ever make it through the program without poking someone’s **eye** out with that thing?”

Ed laughed. “I don’t know, but he did. The only thing he poked out was Amanda’s virginity.”

“Wait a minute. I didn’t realize that. He was her **first**?”

“Yup.”

“She must have had a worse first time than **me**,” I said.

“Not at all. According to both of them, it was bordering on the verge of perfect.”

“Wow. I would’ve thought he was just too big.”

“As they both say, sometimes it just works,” he laughed.

That’s when I realized something. I wanted him. **Bad**. I’d **never** looked at a guy with thoughts of wanting in my head, ever. Sometimes it just works. Or, at the very least, you get a glimmer of a hope that it **might** work. Wow, what a concept.

Anyhow, we were in the hall by then, and here came the first groper. Coming right at me, and down goes the hand. So, I took a breath, and relaxed.

Wooooooooo!

Of course, it **might** have been just that I was thinking about how much I wanted Ed!

But, no, not completely. I just wasn't blocking it out, is all. And here came another one. Yeeeeee!

Ed, who was still holding my hand, saw what was going on—and grinned at me. Then he got pulled away to talk to Mike—something baseball-related—and I was on my own. With the parade of hands.

Before I knew it, I was up against a wall—something I **let** happen—with some guy's finger up inside me, working away. I heard Ed. "Natalie? Are you all right?" I opened my eyes and he was standing behind the guy fingering me. "I'm just fine," I grinned.

"Hey Ed. Something wrong?" my groper asked.

"Just checking, Craig," he grinned. "She hasn't adjusted to this too well this week."

"She's adjusting well now," Craig laughed.

"Uh-huh!" I agreed.

"Good," Ed laughed. "Enjoy yourself. See you in accounting." And then he left.

"You and Ed partners, I take it?" the guy—Craig—asked me.

"Yes. And he's my boyfriend as of yesterday." His got a worried look on his face. "Don't worry about it," I laughed. "We both know how The Program works."

"OK," he smiled, and kept fingering me.

And then the damn bell rang!

This happened again between first and second period.

I got into accounting, and sat next to Ed. Clearly uncomfortable.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"I'm **horny**!" I whispered. "Me! Horny! I should've just stayed un-relaxed." He was laughing, the toad. "You!" I hit him. "This is all **your** fault!"

"I take full credit," he grinned. "You should ask for relief."

"No way!" she asserted.

"Suit yourself."

The rest of the morning was worse. By the time I got to lunch, I was **dripping** wet. Oh, Jesus, I was **not** used to this!

I think I was squirming in my seat. “Are you OK?” Amanda asked.

Ed cracked up laughing. “You just shut up,” I said. “I’m fine,” I told Amanda.

“Really? You’re jumping all around. You look like you’ve got an itch.”

Damn Ed, he just laughed louder. “Oh, she’s got an itch all right,” he laughed. I just glared at him.

“You have no idea, you,” I spat at him.

“Oh, I **don’t**? You don’t have any idea what it’s doing to **me** watching you like that.”

“Oh,” I blushed.

“I’m just more used to it,” he grinned.

“OK, **what** is going on?” Amanda demanded.

“Just what you said,” Ed grinned impishly. “Natalie’s got an itch. Right between her legs.”

“You’re **kidding**,” Amanda gasped. She had seen how I had been reacting all week.

“She decided to relax and see if she could enjoy all the guys fondling her today,” Ed said.

“I think it worked,” Amanda grinned.

“Oh God. I’m so horny I’m half tempted to flip over my chair and impale myself on the leg,” I admitted, to my surprise. Ed was grinning. “You stop grinning!” I turned to Amanda. “This is all **his** fault!”

“He found your ‘on’ button.” Amanda giggled.

“And how,” I agreed.

“Hey, I’ve got your chair leg right here,” he joked, pointing down at his crotch. Oh, man, was I **tempted**!

That’s when I knew. I was going to let him fuck me. Immediately, if not sooner. Let him? I was going to **beg** him! Not here, not in the cafeteria, of course—but **soon**. That should’ve made me scared. It did, a little—but it also made me more horny.

And it was too much. It was **too** much. I started shaking. I think I even started weeping a little. “Honey? What’s wrong?” Ed said from across the table. Amanda looked at me with concern.

“I can’t...I can’t....” I sobbed. “It’s too **much**....I can’t...I’m not used to this, I can’t **handle** it! Oh God.....”

Just then the bell rang. Amanda helped me up, and Ed met us at the end of the table, and took my other arm. They escorted me to bio, me still sobbing a bit.

“Natalie,” Amanda said. “You need relief.”

“She’s absolutely right,” Ed agreed.

“Oh, God, no,” I moaned.

“Natalie, listen to me!” Amanda let go of my arm and went to stand in front of me. “Take it from somebody who was pretty repressed when the program started. You need **relief**, and you need it now.” She and Ed practically grabbed me and pulled me to bio—and pushed me into the seat in front of the class.

“What’s going on?” Ms. T asked.

“Natalie needs relief, and she needs it bad,” Amanda said. “And if she denies it, she’s lying to you. She’s a basket case.”

“Really?” Ms. T asked in surprise. She knew what this week had been like for me. “You’re getting it all at once, aren’t you?” she asked with a sympathetic tone. I nodded.

The class had filed in by now. I was embarrassed beyond belief—but Amanda was right. I **was** a basket case. Ms. T asked, “Natalie, have you ever had an orgasm?”

“Wednesday was the first time,” I admitted.

“And that opened your floodgates.”

A little calmer, I said, “Yeah, and I also decided, since this was the last day of the program, that I was going to try to enjoy all the fondling—you know, open myself up to the experience. I think I enjoyed it a bit **too** much. I’m not used to this.”

“Well, that’s what relief is **for**, you know. Any willing volunteers to help Natalie out?” Half the boys in the class raised their hands, to my bemusement. But there was only one choice. “Ed. Help?” I asked.

He grinned, and walked up to me. He bent over and whispered in my ear, “Are you sure? You can still experiment if you want. I made my insecurities go home.”

I giggled and said, “No, not **this**. Just you. Only you. Please?”

“OK. Relax.”

“In front of the whole class?” I giggled.

“Trust me. Close your eyes, breathe deep. You know the drill.”

I did, so I did. I closed my eyes and let the feelings wash over me as he slipped his finger in and out of my pussy. Then, all of a sudden, I felt **something**—something **fantastic**—drive over my clit. I screamed. My eyes opened, and I looked down—and saw his **tongue**.

Oh GOD!

He was—he was **licking** me down there! Oh FUCK! And it felt—indescribable. I came—bucking my hips, grinding my pussy on his hand and mouth, and screaming—in about seven seconds.

The class **applauded**! God, I was so embarrassed. Maggie Benson yelled out, “Jesus, that was **fast**!”

I looked up at Ed. He was grinning. And, boy, was **he** hard!

Ms. T noticed. “Ed, you need relief?”

“Nope, I’m fine,” he claimed. I was disappointed, frankly. When we got back to our seats I said to him, “I would’ve done you.”

“Have you **ever** done that to a guy?”

“Well, no,” I admitted.

“And you’re going to do it to me in front of **class**? I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I see your point. Ed? Thanks. That was...something else.”

“Thought you’d like it,” he grinned.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ED

Natalie. So horny she went off in seconds. Now **that I never** would have predicted!

And she wanted to do **me**—which was very sweet, but... Listen. I’ve had a couple of girls who jacked me off who’d never done it before. They always squeeze too hard! Hey, guys have no idea what they’re doing the first time they go ‘down there’ either, so I say that not to be critical. But it takes some direction if a girl’s never done that. Not in front of a class, not to Natalie—she was still too fragile about sex.

Though, judging by the reaction I got when I went down on her—less fragile by the second.

Anyhow, I **was** completely hard by the time I got done with her, and the hardness wouldn't go down. "Gym's next," Natalie said to me on the way out of the class. "I understand why you didn't want me to do it, but you **really** need someone to take care of that!" she said, pointing down.

"Don't worry, Natalie," Amanda said, coming up behind us. "I've got the situation well in hand," she grinned, and grabbed my by my dick, leading me towards the girls' locker room. Natalie just giggled.

Amanda's a true friend. She got her gym clothes on, went up to the "relief chair", pointed me in, declared "Ed needs relief", and blew me.

She was getting **real** good at that!

After I came—and she swallowed every drop—I told her. "You're practically in Maggie Benson's league. Jared's a lucky guy."

She grimaced. "I'm still working on getting Jared all the way into my mouth. I'm close, but not quite yet."

"Ah, yes," I joked. "Welcome to Ed's Inadequacies, part one."

"Oh, you stop that," she said, giving my shoulder a swipe. "I'm sure Natalie doesn't find it inadequate."

"Well, maybe she won't, but I don't think I'll find that out for a while. I don't think Natalie's quite ready for that," I said.

"Oh **really**," she grinned. "You must've missed that **look** she gave you when you told her you had a chair leg in your lap. I thought she was going to pounce right then and there!"

"Ah, that was just the heat of the moment."

"Not hardly. Trust me," she grinned. "You're going to get laid by your girlfriend, and soon." Her smile got wider. "And, Ed, you know what? She's going to love every minute of it. And I think that's starting to sink in to her now."

I thought about that throughout gym. When we got back into the locker room, and headed for the shower, Amanda and I got into a corner and washed each other. Nothing really sexual, just two friends soaping.

"Ed," she said. "Tell me about Natalie. She told me to tell you that she said it's all right. I know there's some problems there, but I don't know exactly what."

So, I told her. If Amanda said that Natalie gave her OK, then Natalie gave her OK. Amanda doesn't lie—least not to me.

"Wow," she said when I was done. "Now I feel bad. Yesterday I told her that if she raked you over the coals, I'd hunt her down and kill her. I should've said that to **you**!"

I laughed. "What did **she** say to that?"

"She said you were lucky you had such good friends," Amanda told me. "She really is sweet. But now I know—you must have been having Annie flashbacks."

"Yeah."

"Got through them?" she asked.

"Well, first Mike beat me up, then Natalie beat me up—and then I got the good-sense lecture from Ellie. I got worn down," I joked. "No, they were just all telling me things I needed to hear, to get past my fears, you know?"

"Yeah. I'm glad, Ed. You deserve it."

"I'm finally starting to believe that." I looked at her. "How is Annie, anyhow?"

She looked at me in shock. She and Annie wrote regularly, I knew that. "Ed, you have **never** asked me that question."

"I'm asking now. How's she doing?"

"Good. How many details do you want?"

"None at all. Is she safe? Happy? That's it."

"Yeah, she's safe. Her aunt and uncle are great. Happy? I think she's reasonably so. She asks about you all the time, you know. Tries to get me to talk you into opening her letters. I told her I refused to get in the middle of it. But she asks about you."

"What do you tell her?" I asked.

"Just the basics. Since you weren't returning her letters, I didn't want to violate your privacy. So you know—Ed's fine, still as funny as ever, doing well in baseball. Light stuff like that."

"That's fine," I said.

I put Annie out of my mind for now, and got through the rest of the day. Afterwards, I met Natalie at the entrance.

“Hey. We have a date tonight, yes?” I said.

“You bet your ass. You promised me Chinese and a mushy movie.”

“I have practice. Do you want me to pick you up afterwards, or are you going to stick around?”

“None of the above,” she giggled. “Practice takes, what, an hour and half to two hours?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I was wondering,” she said tentatively, “if I could borrow your car?”

I smiled at her. “You have your license?”

“Of course, I just don’t have a car. I figured out if I make enough this summer, I can get a second-hand one, but I don’t have one at the moment. But, yeah, I drive fine.” She looked at me. “I’ll take good care of your baby. I need to go shopping, and the mall’s too far to walk.”

“Sure,” I reached into my bookbag and gave her my keys. “If I trust you, I suppose I have to trust you with my **car**, huh?”

“Yep,” she grinned. She tossed the keys in the air. “See you. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” and she was off.

Shopping? Hmmm. Of course, I shouldn’t question a sudden shopping jones from a girl, right?

I headed to practice.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NATALIE

It’s hard to explain.

I had been nude all week. I had been nude around **Ed** all week. I don’t know if I was becoming **entirely** comfortable with that, but I was becoming **more** comfortable.

And, we went outside, and I picked up my clothes—the usual floor-length skirt and high-necked long sleeve blouse—and I realized, all of a sudden, that I **hated** them. Hated them with every fiber of my being. Hated every single thing in my wardrobe. The short-sleeved polo shirt and calf-length light skirt that I had worn the other day were the **only** things in my whole wardrobe that weren’t completely ridiculous.

I looked at my normal outfit—and it looked, just then, like a straightjacket. I left the school parking lot wearing it, however. I would **not** be returning in it.

The girl needed clothes.

I had plenty of money in my account—this is what Granddad's trust fund is **for**—so I whipped out my debit card, walked through the mall, and when **nuts**. I even bought undergarments—frilly pink and blue and purple things, not my usual Basic White. I even loaded up on makeup. I spent a pile—and had a blast.

Looking at the clock, I noticed I still had a bit of time, so I whipped home. Mom had already gone to work, thank goodness. I tore off the straightjacket and threw it into a heap. The Basic White undergarments soon followed. I tore my hair out of the ever-present bun, and brushed it out as best I could, so it hung in fairly curly blonde waves down past my shoulders.

Then I went through my new goody bags. I went for the frilly pink undergarments. The shirt was also pink—a short-sleeved thing with a red heart right between my boobs. And it was a belly shirt. For pants, I grabbed stonewashed low-rider jeans. Both the top and the jeans were **not** loose-fitting. Every curve I had was prominently displayed. And between the high shirt and the low jeans was a nice strip of belly showing.

Yeah, I know. I had been naked all week—but not by choice. **This** was by choice. And I think, sometimes, clothes are sexier than being naked—if they're the right clothes. These were the right clothes. I put a dash of lipstick and blush on, and a little light eye shadow, and looked in the mirror.

OK, I almost didn't recognize the person staring back at me!

I was stunned, absolutely stunned. And, for a minute, I got cold feet. I looked so **different**. Even being naked, I'd never taken my hair down. And I didn't usually wear makeup. And the **outfit**!

The cold feet disappeared—the minute I imagined Ed's reaction.

No, I wasn't doing this for him—I was doing it for me. I didn't want to be uptight anymore. I wanted to be free, and casual, and sexy. But, yeah, I wanted to knock his socks off, too.

Can you knock the socks off someone who's seen you **naked** with a new outfit and hairstyle? I was about to find out.

I drove back to the school parking lot, and stood next to the car, waiting for him. After a few minutes, I saw him, coming up the path.

And he saw **me**. I swear he blinked three times. And looked like he was going to swallow his tongue.

Paydirt!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ED

I swear, I almost didn't recognize her. I didn't. I recognized the car first, and **then** realized who the blonde standing next to it was.

Oh my fucking head.

I was just stunned. There she was, leaning on the car, giving me a big shit-eating grin. It's amazing—I'd seen this girl naked. Hell, earlier today, I'd gone **down** on her! And she never looked as out-and-out **sexy** as she did right then. Maybe it was the hair being down, or the lipstick, or just the way she **wore** the new outfit—or, holy hell, the way she was **looking** at me. But it was something.

Hey, I know you can be completely naked and still be completely non-sexual. I had seen it—from her, the minute I walked into that office Monday morning. She might have been nude, but there was nothing sexual about it—not with her all curled up in a ball.

This just **screamed** sex—even with clothes on. My word. **Somebody** had woken up, and in a big way. And I'm not talking about Little Ed, either—though he was definitely stirring.

I walked up to her and said, "I can't quite believe what I'm seeing."

That's when her come-hither stare collapsed in a fit of giggles. "I'm not quite sure I believe that I **did** it!"

"You look amazing."

"Thanks," she said with a grin. "It's the new Natalie. You like?"

"I like. I have to warn you, though—I know you've come a long way in a week, but are you sure you're ready for this?"

"For what?"

"For every guy in this parking lot staring at you."

She giggled. "I've been nude for a week, I hope I'm used to being stared at."

"Good point," I laughed. "But, in some ways, **this** is sexier on you than nudity."

She gave me a brilliant smile. "Good. I was hoping you'd notice."

Incredible. Just incredible. Well, they say everyone goes through drastic changes during The Program. Some more drastic than others, but everybody changes. Yeah, of **course** I had. I took a chance on **her**, right?

Of course, the ways **she** had changed were nothing short of astounding.

“So, tell me, big boy,” she purred, “does this outfit earn me a little Chinese food?”

“I’d say so,” I grinned. “Though you’d be getting that even if you weren’t wearing anything.” We both collapsed in laughter. “Come on, gorgeous. I need my car keys.” She flipped them to me over the car, then got in the passenger’s seat.

We headed down to the best Chinese restaurant in town.

“Take-out or eat-in?” I asked.

“I don’t think there’s a good old flick playing on the TV inside,” she pointed out.

“Good. Take-out it is,” I chuckled. We went in, grabbed a menu, and good-naturedly haggled over the selection. We came up with an order, put it in, and waited in the lobby, chatting about this and that. It was done pretty quickly, and we headed for my house.

“Hey,” I said to my parents as we walked in.

“Hey. I smell Chinese,” Mom laughed.

“You smell correctly. You remember Natalie, right?”

“Hello, Natalie,” Mom said. She greeted Mom and Dad.

“Hey, honey, my DVD collection’s over there. Go pick something out.”

“OK,” she said, and headed over.

“We losing the TV again?” Dad laughed.

“Nah,” I laughed back. “We’ll take it upstairs. I wanted her to see *Singing In The Rain* on the big screen, but my TV will be fine today.” Natalie was walking towards me with a DVD. “What did you find?”

“The Philadelphia Story,” she smiled.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” Mom said.

“She loves Hepburn,” I said.

“And this one’s not only got Hepburn,” she grinned, “but it’s got romance, and humor, **and** Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart. How can you go wrong?”

“You really do love old films as much as Ed,” Mom said.

“Yeah, I do,” she grinned. “Anyhow, sweetie, before we repair to the dinner theatre, can you point me to the facilities?”

I did so, and went back into the living room while she did her business.

“Tell me,” Mom said, “is that the same girl who was in here on Tuesday?”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Hard to believe, huh? **That** is brand new. She borrowed my car keys while I was at practice and went shopping. I walked out of practice to **that**.”

Mom laughed. “Well, I know how much going through The Program changed Amanda Frazier.”

“Yeah,” I said. “This is a little bit more drastic—but she had further to come than Amanda.”

“What’s shocking **me**,” Dad said with a laugh, “is that my son, the tomcat, actually brought home the same girl twice in a **week**.”

I grinned at them. “Well, get used to seeing her a lot more than twice. She’s not going anywhere.”

It took Mom a minute. “Wait a minute, you mean, you two.....?”

“Yeah,” I cut in. “As of yesterday. I didn’t have a chance to tell you.”

“Ed, that’s great!” Mom said. “Can I say finally?” she laughed.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Hey, you know why. I needed time. I also needed the right girl.”

Just then, the right girl came out of the bathroom. She walked up to me, curled her arm around mine, looked up at me, and said, “So. Feed me!”

“You got it,” I said, to my parents’ laughter. I led her upstairs. We put the movie in the DVD player, and spread the Chinese food out on the bed.

During the opening stuff on the DVD, I spooned out the food. “My parents know about us now,” I told her. “I didn’t see them yesterday to tell them.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. They’re thrilled,” I said, and she beamed at me. “Dad was shocked that I brought home the same girl twice in a week. I told them, ‘Get used to her.’” She laughed at that. I looked at her and said, “Does it bother you?”

“What?” she asked.

“My reputation. You know, when it’s to the point that my parents know about it....”

She laughed. “No, it doesn’t bother me. You explained that earlier in the week. And, like I said, I trust you.”

“Good.”

Just then, the movie started. We shut up, watched, and ate.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NATALIE

Let’s see. I had this wonderful guy. I had Chinese food. I had Hepburn and Cary Grant.

Does life get any better than this?

I **love** The Philadelphia Story, it’s such a great film. One of my top five. Ed liked it, too, and told me he hadn’t seen it in a while, so it was a good pick.

After we had exhausted the capacity of our stomachs, Ed paused the movie, grabbed the leftovers and the trash, and ran downstairs with them. He came back up, sat down next to me in the bed, and re-started the movie.

The full-bore sprawled-on-the-bed cuddle quickly followed.

And I recognized the feelings. And I let them happen, for a change. He wasn’t touching anything, you know, erogenous—it was just cuddling. But I still felt it. Low-grade, but I felt it.

I put them on the back burner to simmer—I really **did** want to watch the movie—but I liked having them simmering in the background. I felt like my insides were humming.

The movie ended, and Ed said, “I forgot how much I liked that one.”

“One of my favorites,” I agreed.

He leaned over and kissed me. I kissed him back, hard. Before I knew it, we were in one hell of a liplock.

The simmering picked up.

He kissed down my neck—wow, who knew how good **that** felt?—while his hands rubbed up and down my sides. I had my hand on his hips, facing him on his bed. He came back up to my mouth, and we devoured each other.

Then he dropped the kiss. “I need to warn you,” he said in a low growl, “I’ve done things to you twice now, and I stopped. If this goes any further, I’m not going to be able to stop. I want you so bad it hurts. Are you ready for that?”

I answered him by sitting up, smiling at him, and quickly pulling my shirt over my head. He grinned, and then chuckled, pointing at my frilly pink bra. “When you go shopping, you don’t go halfway,” he laughed.

“Nope,” I agreed. “Help with the clasp?”

He grinned, and reached behind me. When he did, I whispered in his ear, “I’ve been as ready as I can get since lunch. I want you so bad I’m **throbbing**. And I’m not used to that at all.”

“I know you’re not,” he whispered. “I’ll make it OK, I promise.” And his hands were on my boobs. And then, he was going lower, and his **tongue** was on my boobs.

Oh, **man**! Simmer, simmer, bubble, bubble.

While he did that, I felt his hands reaching for the button of my jeans. “You’re in for another treat. The panties match the bra,” I giggled. He laughed, and quickly started peeling my jeans off. I raised my hips to help him. They were off, but my panties were still on, as he reached between my legs and started rubbing me through the panties.

“They’re new, so we have to christen them, right?” he said. Oooh, how nice and naughty **that** was! And it was working. In a couple of minutes, they were drenched! “Mission accomplished,” Ed chuckled, and took them off me. Then he started working his fingers up and down my pussy. Oh, man.

But I stopped him. I wanted something else right now. “Stop! Wait!” I shouted. Ed jumped back. “Something wrong?” he said worriedly.

“Yes!” I said, and reached for the hem of his shirt. “You. Clothes. **Off!**” He laughed, and helped me get them off. Then he lay back down as naked as I was. “Now you may continue what you were doing,” I giggled. He laughed, and did.

While he gently rubbed my pussy—simmer, simmer—I looked at his dick. Sure, I had seen it all week. But I’d never seen it like **this**. I’d never seen it, you know, knowing where it was **going** at some point in the evening. I’d never looked at it and said to myself, “this is going to be inside me, and soon.” It was a whole new perspective.

It made my mouth water.

I reached out and put my hand on it. As I had told Ed, I'd never done this. But I was drawn to it like a magnet. Me, who had been so **scared** of this! I cupped my hand around it, and started moving my hand up and down on it. It was like steel, it was so hard. It was also throbbing in my hand!

"Is this all right?" I whispered to Ed.

"Just perfect," he said. "If I had known you were that good at it, I would've let you in bio. Most girls who've never done it before squeeze too hard."

"I don't want to bruise it, I'll need it in a minute," I giggled. He looked at me with a mixture of complete surprise and utter lust.

"You are something else," he laughed. "I'd never thought I'd have you here like this, not after what I saw Monday."

"I was forced into The Program against my will, by my mother," I pointed out. "That made all of my fears and phobias and anxieties ten times worse. You haven't forced me into a thing. You don't take, you give. It made all the difference."

He moaned under my hand. "Well, if you keep that up, I'm going to roll you on your back and start taking, in a hurry."

"It's OK to take what's freely offered," I smiled at him. And I meant it—but he must have seen something in my eyes.

"You're scared," he said simply.

"You bet your ass," I laughed. "But that's OK. I'll get by it." Then I saw something. "You're scared, too!"

"Yeah," he admitted.

"Why?"

"Because you've had three very bad experiences. If I'm number four, I don't know if I'd be able to live with myself."

"You won't be," I laughed. "Listen to me, Ed. You've had two fingers in my pussy for five minutes. I know you're not trying to get me off, just get me worked up—which is the only reason I'm still coherent—but your hand is buried in my pussy. And I'm relaxed. I'm **comfortable**. It feels **great**. Don't worry about any disasters. They're not going to happen."

"Then why are **you** scared?" he asked.

"Feelings that you're not used to, especially intense ones, are just scary." I admitted.

“OK, I’ll buy that.”

“Now, can we stop talking? I’d like you to move your hand faster,” I giggled.

“Oh, I’ll do better than that. Let go of my dick, though.”

I was puzzled, but I did so. I felt his fingers go in, with his palm up towards the front of my body. Then he curled his fingers up, again towards the front of my body. And they rubbed.

Oh my GOD. I **shrieked**!

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?” I yelled.

“Your G-spot,” he giggled. “You like?”

“Oh Jesus!” Now I know why he made me let go of his dick—I would have torn it off!

“Lay back,” he said. We had been on our sides, facing one another, so I rolled onto my back. He kept his fingers in me—but started moving down my body with his head. This time, I watched him, as his tongue gently slurped up the length of my pussy—then zeroed in on my clit. As he worked away at it, his fingers started massaging my G-spot again.

Oh my fucking head. Simmering? Try boiling over. Try **exploding**. The world stopped—the world just fucking stopped. It was incredible.

“Wow,” Ed said as I was coming down. “I’d heard about that, but that’s the first time I’ve ever seen it.”

“What?” I asked dreamily.

“You came.”

“I know I came, silly,” I giggled.

“No, I mean you squirted.”

“I **what**?” I asked, amazed.

“Squirted. Female ejaculation. It’s rare but it happens.” I looked at him—his face was **drenched**!

“Oh. It kinda felt like I was peeing,” I said sheepishly.

“It’s not pee,” he laughed. “It was fun,” he said. “I liked watching it—even if I did get it in the eye.”

“You’re something else,” I smiled. “Ed? Make love to me. Please.”

He just smiled, and climbed up the length of my body, and positioned himself in between my legs. He grabbed his dick and started rubbing it up and down the length of my pussy, making me groan. “Ready?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” I panted. Then I felt it. His dick slowly slipping through my entrance. Oh God. He took it nice and easy, slipping into me bit by bit. Oh God.

I was right. It was like my first three disastrous experiences weren’t even the same **thing**. And they weren’t. It was like I said earlier—this was **my** choice.

And, Jesus, it felt good!

Then he was all the way in. “Good?” he asked.

“Oh **yeaaaaah!**” I blurted. He laughed. “Oh, God, Ed, fuck me!” I demanded. He did.

Oh, man, I felt like I was floating on a cloud. Who knew? Not me. This was exquisite. I lifted my legs up and wrapped them around his ass, and wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

“Oh, God, Ed, go faster,” I got out. “And KISS ME!” I demanded. He got out a chuckle, and did as I asked, picking up the pace as he lowered his mouth to mine. I found what I wanted—his tongue. I devoured it.

That was all **I** needed. Oh, God, what a cum. He went right after, his lips locked with mine as he groaned into my mouth and poured himself into me. It strung mine out. It was fantastic.

Afterwards, when we were sprawled in a heap, legs and arms intertwined, Ed suddenly said. “Oh, Jesus. I’m an irresponsible asshole.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“I never even asked you if you were protected.”

“Oh, that. Don’t worry about it,” I giggled. “I’ve been on the pill since I was 13. Mother’s insistence. For once, I’m glad of it,” I laughed.

“That’s good. I still feel like an ass. I’m **never** irresponsible about that.”

“It’s OK. I got you going,” I giggled.

“From the minute I saw you in the parking lot in that outfit,” he laughed. “It’s a good thing I like the Philadelphia Story. If you had picked a boring one, I don’t think I could’ve made it through it.”

I laughed. “Hey, I picked one of my favorites on purpose.” I looked at him. “This was the daydream I had the other day. Us watching a good old flick, then fucking like bunnies.” I giggled. “Of course, in the daydream, it was Casablanca—but I wasn’t in the mood for that today.”

“I would’ve picked The Sound Of Music, but **that’s** three hours long!” he laughed.

“That’s why you let **me** pick,” I laughed.

“Nat? That was the best ever. And I mean it. Not even close.”

I knew what that meant for him to say. I was touched. “I don’t think I have to tell you that in my case!” I giggled.

“No, you don’t,” he laughed. “Natalie?” he asked. I looked at him. “I don’t want you to leave here tonight.”

Awwww. “I don’t want to leave, either. Will your parents mind?”

“No, not at all. Will your mother?”

“Yeah. Do I care?” I said.

“She won’t be happy,” Ed said.

“After seventeen years of hell, I refuse to concern myself with her happiness for a second more,” I declared.

He kissed me. “Mom’s still downstairs. Let me go down and tell her, just so she’s not surprised to see you in the morning.”

“K,” I said.

“Natalie?” he said. I looked at him. “I love you.”

YES! “I love you, too,” I said.

YES! YES! YES!

He headed downstairs, and I lied back onto his bed—just about as happy as it gets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ED

Man. That really was the best ever. I was kind of stunned at that. I was no virgin. And I had had sex—once—with someone I was in love with.

But that was the best ever.

And I said it. I can't believe I said it.

I was still kicking myself for not asking about protection, though. Dumb, dumb, irresponsible, and dumb. I know better than that. I got lucky.

Of course, I think I got lucky in a number of ways. And that's **not** a double entendre.

I came downstairs and found Mom, sitting on the couch.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," she grinned. "What's up?"

"Natalie's spending the night, is that OK?"

"Of course. Do her parents mind?"

"That is a long story," I sighed. "Natalie just has a mother—and she'll probably be furious, but Natalie doesn't much care."

"Well, Ed, I'm a little uncomfortable with Natalie staying here if it's against her mother's wishes."

"Natalie having anything even remotely approaching a normal **life** is against her mother's wishes. I'm serious." I went through Natalie's history with her mother.

"My God," Mom said. "She seems remarkably well-adjusted."

"To a point," I told her. "The Program has actually helped a lot. And she's ranked seventh in the class."

"Wow. You got a smart one," she grinned.

"Hell of a lot smarter than a dumb-ass third baseman, for sure," I grinned.

"Yeah, right. You know you're capable."

"Not in **her** league, though. But she's smart, that helps. She has her 'out' all planned—a college scholarship."

“With those grades, she shouldn’t have a problem,” Mom commented. “But she must have other problems. The Program must have thrown her. Nudity, **and** all that touching?”

“It wasn’t easy. It’s gotten better.”

“Ed, have you guys.....” she hesitated.

“Made love?” I laughed. “Just now, for the first time.”

“Was it OK for her?”

“Yeah, it was. She trusts me. She also loves me. That makes a difference, you know that.”

“I agree,” Mom said. “Just, hey, I’m worried about you. You know why. And now that you’ve told me, I’m worried about **her**.”

“I’m worried about her, too—but I think she’ll be OK. As for me? I’m probably not going to shock you if I tell you I came damn close to stopping this thing before it started.”

“Nope, I’m not surprised at all. What changed your mind?”

“First was a few choice words from Mike. Second was a few even choicer words from Natalie herself. She overheard me talking to Mike, and yesterday morning asked me who Annie was. When I told her the whole thing, she had a few things to tell me. Forcefully, I might add.” Mom grinned at that. “So, after that—with my heart at war with my head—I went where I always go.”

“Ellie Kirkland,” Mom smiled. “I’ve always thought I should be jealous of that woman,” she laughed.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “You know better.”

“Yeah—I like Ellie too much. And I **do** realize that this kind of thing is her profession, and that she knows her stuff, and that she loves you almost as much as I do. So, it’s OK. What did Ellie say?”

“To stop blaming myself for Annie’s mistake, and to stop expecting Natalie to make the same mistake Annie did.”

“Common sense, Ed,” she pointed out. “You’ve blamed yourself for Annie?”

“Of course. This is **me** we’re talking about.”

“That’s stupid. Annie loved you very much, but the two of you were in **way** over your head.” She looked at me. “And, I guess I’m wondering if you’re in over your head again.”

“Probably,” I chuckled. “But Natalie’s older, more sure of what she wants, and I’m older, too. I got help this time.”

“Help?” Mom asked.

“She’s one of the gang. All her problems that she had at the beginning of the week were due to isolation. I stopped the isolation—brought the whole crowd into helping her. She and Amanda really hit it off. She thinks Lily’s a howl. I even had Ty Christopher watch out for her when she was finding the whole gym shower experience to be a bit much. She came to the game Tuesday, and was uncomfortable being there in the stands nude, so I had her sit with Jared and Amanda. You know them. She wasn’t alone in her nakedness for long.”

She laughed, and said, “Ed? Don’t ever call yourself a dumb third baseman again, OK? That was good thinking.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Look, if she needs a place to stay, **anytime**, you know she can stay here. And if that’s too much pressure on your relationship at this point, she can always stay in Katherine’s room.”

“Thanks.” I grinned at her. “She won’t be in Katherine’s room tonight, by the way.”

“That I figured out,” she laughed.

“Night, Mom.” I headed up the stairs.

When I got there, Natalie had fallen asleep, nude, spread out on my bed. I nudged her to one side—gently—and snuggled up behind her. She opened her eyes half-way, looked me, smiled, and settled into my arms, falling back asleep right away. I soon joined her.

--end of part five--

ED AND NATALIE NAKED IN SCHOOL PART SIX SATURDAY

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO NATALIE

I woke up, a bit disoriented, until I realized that Ed was wrapped all around me.

Oh, man, did that feel nice!

I could've stayed there forever. Well, almost. The ol' bladder pressure eliminated **that** thought. I quietly extricated myself from Ed's arms—he didn't even stir, he was still out—threw on my clothes, and went to find the bathroom.

Ed's Mom was there. OK, so I blushed. Coming out of my boyfriend's bedroom in the morning and running into his **Mother** was another new experience.

"Good Morning, Natalie? Sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Bauer."

"Where's Ed?"

"Still out like a light," I laughed. "I'm looking for the bathroom."

"Right there," she pointed. "If you want, come on down when you're done. I'll put coffee on." And down the stairs she went.

I did my business, went back and checked on Ed—still out—and decided to go downstairs. I had a feeling Mrs. Bauer wanted to talk to me.

I came downstairs and she had the coffee done, and was reaching for cups. "How do you take your coffee, Natalie?" she asked.

"Light and sweet," I giggled. "I like the caffeine but try to dilute the taste." She laughed, and fixed the coffees. Pointing to the kitchen table, she sat down. I joined her.

"When Ed asked if you could stay over, I was a little worried that your mother didn't like the idea. So, Ed told me your whole history. I just wanted you to know that I knew."

"That's fine," I smiled. "If your son is going out with someone, you deserve to know how screwed up she is."

"From meeting you, and talking to Ed, I don't get the impression that you're screwed up. You seem to me to be a very bright young lady trying to pick her way through a life that hasn't been very kind."

"Thank you," I said. "Ed tells me you and Mr. Bauer are great parents. Wise, open, non-judgmental, all that good stuff."

She laughed and looked up at the ceiling, "Why, thank you, Ed."

I laughed and continued, "You've never tried to, I don't know, brainwash your kids or anything."

"No."

“I’ve found out it’s easy to do. I’ve found out it’s hard to break once it’s been done to you. I’m still figuring some of that out. I guess that’s why I feel a little screwed up.”

“Ed tells me you hit it off with Amanda Frazier.”

“Yeah, she’s great,” I smiled. “Jared, too.”

“Amanda, from what I understand, had some of her own brainwashing to break through when she entered the program.”

“I know a little of that. Maybe I’ll talk to her more about it.”

“Natalie,” she said, “if things are that bad at home, maybe you should find another place to live. I told Ed last night that you’re always welcome here.”

Oh, man, how sweet is **that**? “Thank you so much, that’s very generous. I’ll keep it in mind. For right now, I think I’m all right. I’m just not going to buckle under to her demands anymore, or listen to her ridiculous ideas. But I’ll stay there for the time being.” I grinned. “I love your son, but living together is a wee bit premature.”

“You could stay in Ed’s sister’s room until she gets home from college.”

“Nah, **that** wouldn’t happen.” Then I realized what I said. I blushed purple.

Mrs. Bauer just laughed. “Ed told me you two made love for the first time last night.”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“He also said it was something of a breakthrough for you.”

“You could say that,” I blushed deeper.

“It was for him, too, you know,” she said. I looked up, startled. “When he told me about it, those were the words he used—made love. Ed doesn’t make love, he has sex. Yeah, it’s hair-splitting, but, with Ed, it’s a pretty strong semantical point. Ed doesn’t use the L-word,” she grinned. “Not since...” and then she trailed off.

“Not since Annie. I know,” I smiled. “He said it, you know. That he loves me.”

“You **are** kidding,” she gasped. “Natalie, honey, I don’t want to alarm you, but I wonder if you know how hard it was for him to say that.”

“I have an idea,” I grinned. “It was hard for **me** to say. Though he made it easier by saying it first.” She giggled at that. “But, yes, I know about Annie—but I’ve **never** said it to **anybody**. Frankly, I don’t think I’ve ever **felt** it. And that includes my mother. This is new, everything about this is new. Being in love, having friends—heck, enjoying sex.” I blushed again. “You’re easy to talk to,” I said.

“Thank you. That’s nice to hear, considering my son takes all his problems to Ellie Kirkland,” she laughed. “That’s a joke—Ellie’s the best.”

“I’ve never met her. Ed’s suggested I should. I’m worried that she’d get protective services involved.”

“Not if you do it informally. Besides which, wouldn’t that be a good thing? You’re being abused, Natalie. Let’s call it what it is—abuse and neglect.”

“Marginal abuse, at best,” I contended. “Neglect? Yeah. But I’m almost 17. I don’t want to go to foster care at my age. Besides which,” I sighed, “though college is my way of getting out, part of me is worried what’s going to happen when I’m gone.”

“To you?”

“No, to Mom. Mrs. Bauer, she’s incapable of taking care of herself. I do all the cooking, cleaning, shopping, everything. She’s either at work, passed out drunk, or with a guy—or watching TV. When I leave, she’s going to go straight downhill. I know she’s done some nasty things to me, but she **is** my mother.”

Mrs. Bauer looked at me. “Now I know why you and Ed hooked up. You’re both givers. However, I’m going to tell you something that I told Ed when he was going through that whole Annie mess—keep a little bit for yourself. Ed didn’t, with Annie, and it cost him. I don’t think you have to worry about **Ed**, because with him you’ll get back everything you give.”

“Moreso,” I grinned.

“I agree, but I’m biased,” she laughed. “But when it comes to your mother? Keep a little bit for yourself.”

“That’s what I’m learning to do,” I admitted.

Just then, Ed came downstairs and walked into the kitchen. “Oh, no. My mother and my new girlfriend having a coffee klatch. Shoot me now. How far are we into the Embarrass Ed stories? Is it almost time for the embarrassingly cute baby pictures? I know how this stuff works.” His mother and I were both giggling. He came up behind me, leaned down, and kissed me on the cheek. “Morning.”

“Morning,” I smiled back.

He headed for the coffee, and went back into it. “I suppose I should thank my lucky stars that Katherine isn’t here. She’s got a treasure trove of Embarrass Ed stories, and no hesitation about telling them. Hell, I think she’s working on a **book**.” He sat down with us at the table. “So, tell me, Natalie. What horrible things do you now know about me?”

“Nothing,” I smiled. “No embarrassing stories.”

“**Yet**,” his mother said with a laugh. “I’ve got plenty of time for that.”

“Remind me to burn all the baby pictures,” Ed quipped. “So, where’s Dad?”

“Where else? It’s Saturday morning,” his Mom said.

“Ah, yes. Dad plays golf,” he told me. “Golf—the only sport whose practitioners make baseball players look like they’re in shape!”

“I don’t know,” I said impishly, “I didn’t notice any stamina problems.” Then I remembered his mother was there. I blushed bright red. “Oops.”

She just laughed. “Ah, young love,” she said.

“Y’see, that’s the good part about being the youngest of three,” Ed said. “Mom has seen and heard it **all**.”

“Definitely,” she agreed. “Ed’s brother Patrick is a junior in college, and his sister Katherine is a freshman. And Patrick was a wild child. Katherine had her own set of issues.”

“Being a bitch, mostly,” Ed said, earning a glare from his mother. “You know it’s true,” he maintained.

Mrs. Bauer sighed. “They’ve never gotten along.”

“Anyhow, enough of Kate. I’m in too good of a mood.”

“Who’s up for breakfast?” Mrs. Bauer said.

“I’m starving,” Ed admitted. “Nat?”

“Well, I don’t want to impose.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mrs. Bauer said. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled,” I smiled.

“Scrambled it is. Ed, I heard the mailman. Can you check the mail?”

“I have nothing but boxers on,” he said, bemused.

“You’ve been **naked** all week!” she pointed out.

“Relax. I’ll get it. You wouldn’t want to overexcite the neighbors,” I teased. “Besides, it’ll be payback for breakfast.”

I went out and got their mail, and brought it in. It was **their** mail. I didn’t snoop. But I couldn’t help but see the return address on the top letter.

They told me to just put it on the coffee table, so I did, then went back into the kitchen. We ate breakfast and chatted. Then, Mrs. Bauer got up and said, “So, what’s in the mail?”

I followed her, and whispered, “I was **not** snooping, but I saw the top letter. Would you mind if I gave it to him?” She looked at it, looked at me, smiled, and handed it. Ed came out of the kitchen and sat on the couch. I sat next to him.

“Anything for me?” he smiled at his mother. I took a deep breath, and handed him the letter.

“I saw this, it was on top. I think you should open it,” I told him.

“Annie,” he said in a whisper.

“I think you should open it,” I pressed. “You should stop sending them back unread. You need to open it.”

“Why?” he asked me, incredulous.

“Because you still care about her.”

“But I have you now,” he grinned.

“That doesn’t matter,” I argued. “Look, if you open that letter and it says she wants you back, she can’t live without you, blah blah blah—would you dump me and go back with her?”

“Not a chance,” he smiled.

“Good. So, then, it doesn’t matter that you have me. Because you still care about her. Maybe not in a romantic way, but you still care about her. I think you always will.” I took a deep breath. “Look, because of the way I was up until a week ago, there are very few people I’ve cared about. Because of you and your friends, that number has gone **way** up in a week. Because of **that**, I know how valuable it is. Ed, open the letter.”

He stared at it for a good minute—and then he opened it. I’ll admit, I was surprised. And, judging from the look on her face, Mrs. Bauer was **shocked**. I watched him as he read, getting shakier by the minute. When he was done, he put the letter in my lap.

“This is yours,” I said, trying to hand it back.

“No. Read it. Please.” He was practically on the verge of tears. “I’ll be right back.” He headed upstairs.

“That wasn’t you, I don’t think,” his Mom told me with a smile, “he hates crying in front of me.” She took a breath. “That was one of the most selfless, loving, generous things I’ve ever seen. You’re quite a girl, Natalie Weinberg.”

I just smiled, and blushed. Then I picked up the letter. It was dated Wednesday.

“Dear Ed,

Here I go again, writing the letter that’ll never be read. Sometimes I wonder why I bother. Crazy hope, I guess.

I’m fine. Aunt Kristina and Uncle Jack are wonderful. They’ve become the parents I hadn’t had since Dad died. I’ve gotten over a lot of things that happened. I’m in therapy, and it helps. I’ve been in it right along.

I talked to Amanda last night. She said there’s a new girl in your life—she said there’s nothing happening quite yet, but she thinks there will be. She also said you’d probably be pissed that she told me—and **she’ll** probably be pissed that I mentioned it here. Of course, you’ll never read this. But, if you do, please, Ed: GO FOR IT! You deserve it. Of all people, you deserve it. It still kills me that I couldn’t have been the one—but I couldn’t. Not then. And you’ll never know how sorry I am for that.

I’ve been dating Gary for six months. He’s the first, really, since—you know. I had to re-learn how to love and trust someone. It was easy—because **you** taught me. It’s my fault that I caught on too late, not yours.

Every letter I’ve ever sent has ended the same way. You’ve been my best friend since I was eleven. You’ll **always** be my best friend. And I miss my best friend very, very much.

Love,
Annie.”

I finished—blinking back my own tears—when Ed came down, a forced smile on his face. He was dressed.

I stood up and walked over to him, handing him the letter back. “Ed?” I said. “Newburgh’s only twenty minutes away.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Not only **can** you, you **need** to. Look, I know you loved her, but forget about your relationship. That was doomed, you know it, and she obviously knows it, too. But she was your **best friend!** **That** is not doomed, and doesn’t have to be. If this were—I don’t know—**Amanda**, would you even think twice?”

He grinned, surprising me. “That’s exactly what Mike said that night at The Mariner.”

“Wow. And my mother’s not even a psychologist,” I laughed. “Ed, get your car keys. You need to do this.”

“Not by myself.”

“OK,” I agreed. He went to get the car keys.

“Natalie?” His mother said. “You’re a miracle worker.”

“Just giving back what I’ve already gotten, that’s all,” I smiled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ED

I couldn’t believe I was doing this. I couldn’t believe it. Part of me was screaming in terror at just the thought.

But I was doing it. We got into Newburgh and found the address pretty easily.

I pulled up in front of the house. I admit it, I was shaking.

“Good luck,” Natalie said, and leaned over and kissed me.

“Aren’t you coming?” I asked.

“Nope. I’m going to go for a little walk. We passed a store back on the main street, I’m going to walk there and get something to drink. Ed, you haven’t seen her in two years. It’s not my place to be there.”

“Natalie, I—“ he began.

“It’s not my place. Not right at first. This is between the two of you. I’ll be back. GO. I’ll make sure you get in the house, and then I’ll go for my walk. I’ll be back.” And she smiled at me.

I kissed her, and opened the drivers’ side door, and headed up the walk. My brain was in turmoil. I didn’t know what to think. Except one thing—the trust that Natalie had in me was nothing short of astounding.

I rang the bell. A woman answered.

“Hello, I was looking for Annie Zipelski. Is she in?”

“Yes,” she looked at me a bit suspiciously. Probably because I was a guy, and not the boyfriend. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“Yes, ma’am, please tell her it’s Ed Bauer.”

“What?” she said incredulously. “You **came**?” She opened the door all the way. “Get in here!” She gave me a huge grin, then walked down a hall that led from the front door. At the end of the hall, there was a flight of stairs.

“Annie? Get down here. You have company,” she yelled up the stairs.

“Gary? Eileen?” I heard from upstairs.

“None of the above. But, believe me, it’s someone you want to see.”

“OK,” I heard in a tentative voice, and then heard footsteps on the stairs. She came down, and turned the corner, and there she was. Two years, and she hadn’t changed much. The same shoulder-length brown hair in a ponytail, the same bright brown eyes, the same petite-yet-proportional body. She smiled at the woman—her aunt, I’d surmised—and then turned and saw me.

The look of absolute shock on her face was something to behold. “Eddie?” she managed in a strangled voice.

“Hiya, Zippy,” I grinned.

“Ohmygod EDDIE!” she yelled, and then **ran** down the hallway, and **launched** herself into my arms so hard she almost tackled me. “Oh God Eddie, you **came** you finally **came**!” she babbled. “I didn’t think you’d **ever**!”

“You know me, Zippy. Stubborn as all get-out.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. You finally came,” she said, hugging me so hard I thought my ribs would break. “And nobody’s called me Zippy in years,” she laughed. “I missed it. I missed **you**.”

“I missed you, too.”

“Oh, man,” she said, at a loss for words. “Come in. Sit down.” She led me into the living room, and to a couch.

“Why now? Not that I’m complaining, mind you,” she asked.

“Natalie,” I smiled.

“Did you **finally** read my latest letter?” She asked. I nodded. “Is Natalie the girl Amanda told me about?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re going out.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me,” she said. “I just hope she’s worthy of you.”

“She is,” I said. “You’ll figure that out in a minute. Anyhow, Natalie slept over last night. That was—you know—our first time.”

“How sweet,” she giggled.

“Anyhow, Mom was making breakfast this morning, and Nat volunteered to go get the mail. She saw your letter—she knows all about you—and talked me into reading it. Then talked me into coming here.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“So am I,” I admitted.

“Natalie sounds like something else. She knows everything?” I nodded. “And she still pushed for you to come here?” I nodded again. “She must really trust you.”

“She does,” I agreed.

Annie sighed. “I still have all the letters you sent back. The first six months or so—well, I’m now glad you never read them. They were a combination of pitiful wailing that you had abandoned me and me throwing my sexual exploits in your face.” She took a deep breath. “It is easier for me to see, from two years’ distance, just how completely fucked up I was back then.”

“Understandable, you know,” I said.

“Maybe. But I’ve had a hard time forgiving myself for how badly I hurt you. The only person, at that time, who’d ever truly cared about me, and I hurt you, badly. How long did it take you to get over it?”

“That’s not important,” I said.

“How **long**, Ed?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s not going to make you feel any better.”

“I don’t care.”

“Natalie and I have been going out for a whole two days,” I said. She giggled. “So it just happened, OK? And I almost walked away from it.”

“Because of me,” she said. I nodded. “Oh, God, Ed, I’m so sorry.”

“It wasn’t really you. We were **both** young. And I should’ve realized that you were in no condition to have any kind of a relationship. But it was easier, in some ways, for me to hide behind it for two years.”

“How did you finally get past it?” she asked.

I laughed. “Natalie kicked my ass.”

She laughed herself. “Oh, I **really** wanna meet this girl!”

“You can. She’s here. She came with me. She decided to go for a walk, because she said we should have the Grand Reunion by ourselves, but she’ll be back.”

“Good.”

“And you have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah, Gary. Six months now. I didn’t get over it all that easily, either, it just took me a bit shorter than you. Gary’s great, you’d like him.”

“Good,” I said.

She sighed. “Ed, we were only ‘together’ like that for three months. And I don’t want to say it didn’t matter, because that’s not true. But that’s not really it. Look, Aunt Kris and Uncle Jack have shown me that I can be cared for by people that don’t violate me. And Gary taught me how to love again.” Then she started sniffing. “But you can’t replace a best friend. Dammit, Ed, you were my best friend forever! You’ll always **be** my best friend!” Now she was crying full-bore. “And that’s what I couldn’t stand! Oh, God, Ed, I lost—my—best—friend—and—I—couldn’t--,” and then she was just crying. I took her in my arms and let her.

“It’s OK. We both made mistakes. I should’ve done this a year ago.”

“Oh, God, Eddie!” she howled, and just kept crying.

Then I heard, “Annie?” from the doorway. Annie looked up, and said, “G-gary,” and tried to control herself. Ah, this was the boyfriend.

“Who is this?” he said, looking none too happy. Hey, I didn’t blame him. If I saw Natalie crying in the arms of a guy I didn’t know, I’d be suspicious myself. I just tried to look like a nice, non-threatening puppy.

Annie just held her hand out to him, vehemently, while she tried to get herself under control. “Gary,” she finally sniffled, “this is Eddie.”

“Eddie **Bauer**?” he said. Annie nodded. “Man,” he said, coming over to me and shaking my hand, “I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time.”

“I guess I talk about you,” Annie admitted, as she hugged Gary.

“Incessantly,” Gary laughed. “Hey, I didn’t know her back then. I’m glad someone was looking out for her when all hell broke loose. Though I know it cost you some.”

“Yeah, but it was worth it.” I finally admitted it—to myself. Especially here, seeing her happy, healthy, safe—it was worth it. Totally.

You know the expression, peace of mind? I had just gotten it.

“Ed?” Annie’s aunt said, peeking into the room. “Is that your red car out front?” I nodded. “There’s someone in it.”

“A cute blonde?” I chuckled. She nodded. “That’d be Natalie.”

“His girlfriend,” Annie told Gary. “Let’s go!” she enthused. “I want to meet this girl!” She ran out of the house ahead of me, and beat me to the car. Nat looked up in surprise as Annie appeared at the open window.

“Are you Natalie?” Annie asked. “I’m Annie. Thank you. It means a lot.”

“Means a lot to him, too. He just needed to be reminded.” They both giggled.

Natalie had gotten out of the car, and she and Annie were standing next to one another, grinning at me. What did I see when I looked at them? The girl that I loved—and my best friend. It felt like the world’s biggest weight lifting off my shoulders.

“Can you guys stay a while?” Annie asked.

“A bit, as long as we’re not messing with any of your plans,” I said.

“No, we were just going to hang out,” Gary said from behind me.

“That’s settled, then. Come on. Aunt Kris will make lunch,” Annie giggled.

We ended up on the patio, eating sandwiches and drinking cokes. It might have been awkward for Natalie—and Gary, for that matter. But it wasn’t.

“I hear you play ball,” Gary said.

“Starting third baseman,” I said—OK, with a bit of a brag. “I love baseball.”

“Scuttlebutt has it you guys have a heck of a team this year. I know you shut our guys down opening day. With a girl pitcher, even,” he chuckled.

“Girl pitcher?” Annie asked.

“Lily Woodard. Moved down here this past winter from Boston. She’s unbelievable. Throws ninety, and her breaking stuff is lethal. She’s also a great kid.”

“She’s almost as funny as Ed is,” Natalie said. “And, I’m sure you know, Annie, **that** is saying something.”

“It sure is,” Annie agreed. She turned to Gary. “Ed is the funniest person I’ve ever met.”

“Moi?” I said. “Funny? Looking, maybe. Anyhow, back to Lily—she’s great. I’ve gotten to know her really well.”

“I’m wondering about a girl pitcher, though. Do all the guys hit on her?” Annie asked.

“Not unless they want Mike to beat them up,” I chuckled.

“Mikey Kirkland?” Annie asked. “You mean he and Lily.....”

“Are so madly in love you wouldn’t believe it,” I laughed. I turned to Gary. “Ever been to a baseball game, and, on the mound, before the game, seen the catcher give the pitcher a good-luck **kiss**? We sure do have an interesting team.”

“I’ll say,” Gary laughed.

“The first time they ever made love was in right field,” I added.

“That’s great,” Gary laughed. “Where else are two baseball players gonna do it, right?”

“Especially if you know those two. It was perfect,” I agreed.

“Now, I write to Amanda, and we talk every so often, and she’s with Jared Wicklow? I knew him slightly but thought he was a geek,” Annie said.

Natalie broke up laughing. “You wouldn’t say that if you ever saw him naked.”

“Huh?” Annie said. Natalie held her hands in front of her, **very** far apart. “It’s famous far and wide. And I do mean **wide**. And long, too.” Annie broke up laughing.

“And how have **you** seen Jared naked?” she asked Natalie with a smirk.

“It’s hard to avoid. He and Amanda go naked all the time,” I laughed. “I know it had just started before you left, and freshmen weren’t doing it then, but you **remember** The Program, right?” I asked Annie.

“Are they still **doing** that?” she asked in surprise. “I thought it was a disaster.”

“It’s gotten better,” I told her.

“I had heard about that,” Gary said. “Evidently, that girl pitcher was nude when you guys played us. A buddy of mine on the team said she got all cut sliding into home.”

“Oh, the funniest part was when a bouncer went through the mound, and she got dirt in her you-know-what. And took a water bottle in the dugout and cleaned herself out. Mikey and I cracked up, but all the rest of the guys looked at her like she was an alien being or something.” Annie was cracking up. “Anyhow, as for Jared and Amanda, they did The Program back in September. That’s how they met. But, since then, they’ve discovered they like nudity.”

“And the halls clear to make room for Jared’s dick every time they do,” Natalie laughed.

“Well,” Annie asked, “has the great Ed Bauer strut his naked stuff all over school yet?”

“This week,” I told her. She giggled. “Yup. Haven’t had any clothes on in school for the past five days. And, yes, that includes two ball games that I was manning third base in nothing but spikes and a jockstrap. Natalie, too. That’s how **we** met.”

“Oh, and you know the fun part?” Natalie said. “Tonight is our junior prom. Don’t ask me what my dress looks like because I **won’t** be wearing one.”

“Oh, man,” Annie was laughing so hard I thought she was going to choke. “You have to go to your Junior Prom **naked**?”

“Yeah. It’s a school-sponsored activity, and program week runs until Sunday. So, yup, we’ll be nekkid at the prom,” I said.

“I want a picture!” Annie laughed.

“I’ll send you one,” I grinned.

“Damn, I wish we had The Program here,” Gary said.

“It’s done a world of good for a lot of people,” Natalie said. “Me, for one. I was very repressed.”

“Amanda, too,” I told Annie.

“I love Amanda, but she always did have a stick up her ass,” Annie said.

“Not anymore. The Program cured that, and in a hurry.”

We chatted for a while longer, then we had to go. Natalie had a hair appointment.

Annie walked us out to the car. After I got in, she reached in the driver's side window and hugged me. "Thank you for coming." And she turned to Natalie. "And thank **you** for convincing him to."

"It was my pleasure," Natalie said.

"Ed?" Annie looked at me. "Don't be a stranger, OK?"

"Not on your life," I promised. She kissed me on the cheek and then took her head out of the window. "See you soon," I said to her.

"Good," she said. We drove away.

We drove for a bit, then Natalie turned to me and said, "How do you feel?"

I think that's when it hit me, for real—what she had just done for me. And I remembered what I had done for **her** back on Wednesday. And I remembered what **she** had said when I asked that very question. And the answer was the same. "Reborn. I feel reborn."

"I'm glad," she said.

"I love you," I told her.

"I know," she giggled. "I love you, too." She took a breath. "I admit, I was worried a wee bit. I almost felt like I was throwing you back into the arms of your first love. But you **had** to do this."

"When you got out of the car, and you were standing next to her, I took a look—and saw the woman that I love, and my best friend. That's what I saw. And it felt, in that instant, that all was right with the world. I will always love her. But I'm **in** love with **you**. And I **never** would have been able to do this without you. Don't forget that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NATALIE

Oh, man. Is it **possible** to feel this good about yourself?

I couldn't believe it. I was floating. And Ed looked **so** happy. And he still loved me! Yeah, I **was** a little worried—but I knew this was something that had to happen.

"You know what?" I told him. "I really liked her."

"Yeah, I could tell," he said. "I liked **him**, too. Gary, her boyfriend." He sighed with a smile. "I'm glad she's happy. I'm really glad. She deserves it." He shot me a glance. "I just want you to know, that I meant what I told her. I'm not going to go two years without seeing her again. She's too important to me. However, you have **nothing** to worry about."

“I know,” I said. We got back to Westport, and he dropped me off at the beauty salon.

“Are you going to tell Amanda?” I asked him.

“Well, you’re having your hair appointment with her—I figured you’d beat me to the punch,” he laughed. “No, go ahead. Gloat. Amanda’s going to think you walk on water for getting me to do this.”

I laughed, kissed him, and went into the salon.

Amanda greeted me, and we got adjoining chairs. We small-talked for a while, and then I lowered the boom.

“Guess who I met today?”

“Who?” she asked.

“Annie Zipelski.”

“HUH? What? Where did you meet Annie?”

“In her house.” Pause. “With Ed.”

“WHAT? Ed? At **Annie’s**? What...HOW?” She was completely incoherent!

“Well, I have to tell you the whole story. I, well, spent the night at Ed’s last night.”

“Yay!” she enthused. “Was that the first?”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“Was it good?” she asked. “I know you’ve had a rough time.”

“It was marvelous. Incredible. All those things,” I giggled. “Anyhow, I slept over, and was there this morning. The mailman came.” I explained to her how I got the mail, and then convinced Ed to read her letter.

“And then you got him to go **over** there?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“Well, I missed the first half hour or so—that was **their** time, so I took a walk. I understand it was your basic teary reunion.” Amanda laughed. “Then her boyfriend showed up about the same time I got back from my walk. They came out and got me, so I met her then. We were there for close to three hours.”

“That was a chance you took, you know,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think it was ever a huge one. Let’s not forget, he’s taken some serious chances on me this week.”

“So, how’d it go?”

“Really well, I think. Ed looks like he’s got the weight of the world lifted off of his shoulders. And, I have to admit, I really liked Annie.” I grinned at her. “You write to her, right?” she nodded. “And you never told her about Jared?”

“I’ve mentioned him. She knew him a bit when she lived here. I’ve told her that we’re going out, and that I really love him.”

“Yeah, but you never told her about his secret weapon,” I grinned.

“You DIDN’T!” she gasped.

“Well, it came up in conversation. She said that she remembered Jared as a geek. And I said that’s because she’s never seen him naked.”

“Oh, Man,” she laughed. “I think I’m going to hear about it the next time I talk to her.” She sighed. “Maybe I’ll see her more often. She drives now—and she could always get here, because her aunt works here—but she’s shied away from coming, because of Ed. It would be nice if that changed.”

“I think it will,” I told her. “Let’s just say that what I saw today was a friendship rekindled. I think Annie’s going to be around.”

“That would be really cool,” she said. “And it’s really cool that you have no problem with that.”

“The past is the past. Relationships end. Friendships shouldn’t.”

“I still can’t believe you got him over there!” she said. “You two really love each other. It’s so nice to see. You know how I feel about Ed. I love seeing him this happy.”

“Yeah, I do, too. Almost as much as I love **being** this happy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ED

I didn’t go right home. I went to Mike’s. Found him and Ellie in the kitchen.

“Hey, pal. What’s up?” Mike asked.

“Guess where I just was,” I said, pulling a chair up at the table.

“Where?” he asked.

“Annie’s house.”

If Mike looked shocked, Ellie looked **really** shocked. “You’re kidding,” she said. “You actually went to see Annie. I do **not** believe it.”

“Yeah.” I went through the whole thing, with the letter, and Natalie convincing me to open it, and all.

“How was it?” Mike asked.

“Great. It was really great to see her again. Somebody want to tell me why I waited so long to do this?”

“I think you know,” Ellie laughed.

“Probably,” I agreed. “It wasn’t time.”

“This isn’t going to, you know, rekindle anything and cause problems with Nat, is it?” Mike asked.

“Not a chance,” I said. “I’m in love with Natalie. I told her that yesterday.”

“Good for you!” Ellie enthused. “Where is she, anyway?”

“Getting her hair done,” I laughed. “With Amanda. She said she couldn’t show off any fancy dress tonight, so she was going all out with her hair.”

“Oh, I **forgot**,” Ellie giggled. “When Mike told me that Natalie was going to the prom with you, I forgot you’d still be in the program. **That** should be interesting.”

“I’m surprised she agreed to go, frankly,” I said. “Very, very glad—but surprised.”

“It’ll be fine. She’s a lot more at ease,” Mike said. “I don’t think she’ll ever be Jared and Amanda when it comes to nudity,” he laughed, “but she’s a lot better.”

I chatted with them for a while, and then went home. Took a shower, all that.

Natalie had stayed at Amanda’s place after her appointment—not surprisingly, she didn’t want to go home. The plan was for everyone to meet at Mike’s house—including all the parents, so all could get pictures without making the limo go all over Westport. I stopped off at the florist to get her a corsage—a wrist one, natch, since I wasn’t going to be pinning anything to naked boobs—and headed over to Mike’s. I was the first one there.

“Very nice, Ed,” Ellie greeted my naked self as I walked in.

“Thanks, Ellie.”

“Are your parents coming?” she asked.

“Yeah, I had to make a stop, but they’ll be along. My Mom was joking about not having ‘real’ prom pictures of tuxes and dresses and stuff.”

“She’ll get over it,” Ellie laughed.

Just then, Amanda bounded in. “Hey, guys!”

“Hey, Amanda, looking damn good. So, where’s my girlfriend?” I said.

“Gathering her nerves,” Amanda laughed. “I just had to tell her that all the parents will be here tonight—and her being naked.”

“Yeah, and what’s worse, not **all** the parents will be here,” I pointed out. “I don’t even think her mother knows that the prom is tonight.”

“Oh, shit, I forgot about that,” Amanda said.

“It’s OK. I’ll go pump her up.”

“Before you go,” Amanda said, and grabbed my arm. She leaned up and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “That was a very, very good thing you did today.”

“For me, too,” I grinned.

“Good. Go rescue Natalie.”

I stepped out of the house, and there she was, coming up the walk. They had really done a great job on her hair, and I know Amanda helped with her makeup. That, plus her watch, a gold chain, and her shoes, was all there was. God, she was beautiful.

“Hi,” she said shyly, coming into the house.

“Hi yourself, gorgeous,” I said, and kissed her. I took her over and introduced her to Ellie.

“Pleased to finally meet you, Natalie,” she said. “Ed, you didn’t tell me how stunning she was.” Natalie just blushed.

“Oh, I love an all-over blush,” Mike joked.

“Well, it’s not all blush. I’m a wee bit sunburned,” Natalie admitted. “I have used sunscreen, but I think I spent too much time this week at baseball games.”

“Well, you’re very light complexioned,” Ellie said.

“Yeah. It’s the Nordic genes. My mom has a bit of Jewish in her—hence Weinberg—but she’s mostly Swedish. And my father, I’ve been told, was Latvian.”

Mike and I just looked at each other—and started **howling**. Poor Natalie had **no** idea what was going on. We couldn’t stop laughing. When Mike finally did, sort of, it was only long enough to ask Natalie, “So, can you milk a goat?” Which started both of us up again. We finally calmed down long enough to explain the Ed’s Latvian Soulmate joke to Natalie. Then she laughed harder than either of us.

Anyhow, all the parents showed up, along with Jared and Lily, and the picture-taking commenced.

I know it was tough on Natalie—not just being nude, but being the only one without a parent there. However, Lily’s dad quickly sized up the situation, and grabbed a roll of film. “I’ll be your photographer tonight, Natalie,” he said. “I’ll make sure you get these.”

“Thanks,” she managed to get out.

We plied in the limo and headed to the Prom.

You know what? It was great. Honestly, I had been a little nervous about doing the prom nude, but it was great. We had a blast.

There was only one problem. “You know, I didn’t think of this,” Natalie said at one point.

“Think of what?”

“Think of the effect that dancing with you all night in the nude was going to have on me.” She blushed. “I am **really** horny.”

“Well, you just keep that thought,” I laughed.

She did, until we got back to my house. Then she showed me how horny she was. I cured that problem. Repeatedly. Then we cured each other.

We fell asleep intertwined again. I hadn’t felt this good in a long time.

--End of part six--

ED AND NATALIE NAKED AT SCHOOL
PART SEVEN
SUNDAY

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NATALIE

I woke up the next morning to the sensation of something eating my face. I **screamed**.

“WHAT? WHO?” Ed yelled, woken up by my screaming.

I opened my eyes, and saw what was eating my face—a very large black Labrador Retriever! “Oh my God, my heart just stopped.” Ed chuckled behind me. “I’m sorry for waking you. He scared the crap out of me!” He looked up at me and started licking my face again, making me giggle.

Mrs. Bauer burst in the room. “Is everything all right? I heard a scream.” Oh, now I was **really** embarrassed.

“Everything’s fine,” Ed said. “Buster just scared the shit out of Natalie.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so **embarrassed**,” I said. “He started kissing me in my sleep and I woke up and didn’t know what it **was**.”

“That’s OK. Didn’t you have the door closed?” Mrs. Bauer asked Ed.

“Yeah. But you know Buster,” he laughed. “He opens doors,” he said to me.

Mrs. Bauer chuckled and left—and then Buster jumped right up on the bed and started licking me! “Buster, DOWN!” Ed said, but Buster was having none of it. I sat up, trying to fend him off a little, and, when I did, the sheet fell off me—leaving me naked from the waist up. And the damn dog leaned down and licked my **boob**!

I couldn’t help it. I had to laugh. “Ed, your dog is a pervert,” I told him.

“Of course he is,” Ed grinned. “He’s my dog, isn’t he?” I just stuck my tongue out at him. “OK, Buster, that’s enough. I know she’s cute, but only I get to molest her.” He pulled the dog off the bed and led him out of the bedroom. Then he climbed back into bed, took me in his arms, and kissed me. “Good morning, by the way.”

“Good morning to you, too,” I grinned.

“Hey, Ed,” we heard from downstairs. “You guys want breakfast?”

“Sure. Be down in a bit,” he called. “Ah, well. There goes the good-morning boink.”

“That’s OK. You’ll have plenty of other opportunities for that,” I grinned.

“I was hoping I’d wake up first. I was going to crawl between your legs and gently lick you awake. Of course, **Buster** tried that, and you woke up all of Westport with that scream. So I’m probably better off.”

“Oh, you,” I hit him. “If it was down **there**, I would’ve known it was you. I **hope**,” I giggled. “Anyhow, even on my face, I think I would’ve known it was you. Your tongue isn’t like sandpaper,” I grimaced. “He’s certainly a friendly dog, though, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, Buster’s cool. He’s just overbearing.”

“I’ll agree with that,” I giggled. I got up, and found a bag I had left there.

“What’s that?” Ed asked.

“After Amanda and I got our hair done yesterday, I went and bought a few things.” I pulled out a bra and panties, and a tee-shirt and shorts. “I didn’t want to go home, and I didn’t want to wear the same clothes for three days. Especially those **panties**, after what you did to them.” He grinned at me. “My other clothes are already in the bag.”

Ed smiled, and went into his dresser to find some things. He got dressed, and we went downstairs. After a nice meal, and a nice chat with his folks, I turned to him and said, “I think I need to go home.”

“I guess you would eventually,” he said.

“Well, I have to at least stop in,” I told him.

“That’s fine. Let’s go.” I went upstairs and grabbed my clothes and stuff, and we took off.

“You need to know something,” Ed said. “My mother loves you. She told me so. She’s crazy about you.”

“I know,” I smiled.

“I just thought—since you’re probably about to get a load of shit at home—I just thought, you know, it might help.”

“It does,” I smiled. “It helps a lot.”

We pulled into my building, and went upstairs. I unlocked the door and stepped in, and immediately sighed. The place was a **disaster**.

“Three days I’m gone, and look at this place,” I said to Ed.

“Hey, who the fuck are you?” Oh, Jesus. There was some guy sitting on the couch, watching TV.

"I live here. Who the fuck are **you**, and where's my mother?"

"She's still asleep." He gave me a leer. "I wore her out last night." I could see his eyes all over me. I was wearing a simple shorts and tee-shirt set, but it flattered my curves—and this scumbag was taking them all in.

"That's nice. You can leave now." I said.

"Sharon said I could stay," he said.

"Good for Sharon. I'm telling you to get out. I live here, I'm underage, I have no idea who you are. You leave, or I call the cops."

"Jesus! I'm going, I'm going." He finally did, leering all the way. But he left.

"You're something else," Ed said. "I thought I was going to have to get involved, but I didn't."

"See? You've got the drill already," I grinned at him. "Help me when I need it, just stand beside me when I don't." He grinned back. "Now kiss me." He did. "Good. Now I have to clean this mess up."

"This is when I'm supposed to help you, right?" he laughed.

"You got it," I grinned at him. "No, I'm just kidding. This isn't your mess."

"Not yours either," he grinned, and headed over to the sink.

"You're a sweetheart, you know that?" I told him.

"Yup, that's me, Ed the Sweetheart." I giggled. "Has she done a single dish while you were gone?" Ed asked while starting in on them.

"I doubt it," I said, as I cleared off what I think was the kitchen table. I'd know for sure when I could **see** it.

I found some dishes over there and walked them over to Ed. "Uh-uh, sweetie," he said. "If you're going to add to my pile, I need a kiss in return." I giggled, and gave him one.

"You've got a start on some here. I'll dry." I picked up a towel and started doing just that. "You're a handy man with a sponge, Ed Bauer," I teased him. "Your momma brought you up right."

"Yes she did. Do I get a kiss for my mighty sponge technique?"

“But of course,” I batted my eyes at him, and kissed him again. We stood there, doing the dishes. At one point, I goosed his ass. He took the sprayer and threatened, “Do that again, and I’m going to have my very own private wet tee shirt contest.”

“That could be fun,” I grinned. He just shook his head, and went back to his sponge.

I’ve had to clean up this apartment a million times. I never had **fun** doing it before.

Just then, I heard footsteps shuffling into the kitchen. “Natalie?” It was Mother, of course—dressed in a ratty old housecoat, looking like hell.

“Hello, Mother,” I said.

“Where have you been?” she asked—with no heat, remarkably enough.

“At Ed’s. You remember Ed.” She actually nodded at him! “Last night was the junior prom,” I told her.

“It **was**?” she said. She shuffled over to the couch in the living room—the living room and the kitchen were really one room. “What did your dress look like?” she asked softly, surprising me.

“I wasn’t wearing one,” I laughed. “You picked a real good week to put me in The Program.”

“You mean, you had to go to the prom **naked**?” she asked.

“Yeah. It was good, though,” I told her. “Ed was naked, too, so it was fine—he was in The Program this week, too. That’s how we met.” I grinned at him. “He’s cute naked.” And I goosed his ass again.

“I **warned** you!” And he **did** it! A good blast of water from the sprayer **right** at my boobs! I shrieked.

“You FINK!” I yelled at him—laughing, though. I couldn’t stop laughing. I was drenched, and you could see **right** through my tee shirt **and** my bra.

I had forgotten that Mom was there—until I heard the chuckle. I looked over, and she was actually **smiling**. “He got you good,” she chuckled. Ed and I just looked at each other in amazement.

“Mom, are you drunk?” I asked.

“No,” she chuckled. “Hung-over, yes; drunk, no.” She looked around. “Where **is** Joe, anyhow?”

“If Joe was the sleazebag that was here when I got here, I kicked him out,” I told her.

“Ah,” she said. “All for the better, I guess.” I just looked at Ed, not knowing what to say to that.

“I really should change my shirt,” I said to Ed.

“What’s the point? We’re doing dishes. It’s going to get wet anyhow. Change it after.” Then he leered at me. “Besides, I like the view.”

“I’ll get **you** back,” I grinned. “Wash.” He grinned back, and went back to the dishes. After a few minutes, I heard Mother say something.

“What?” I asked.

“I said, I thought you weren’t coming back.”

“Where would I go?”

“With him?” she said.

“His mother did invite me. But, no, we’re not ready for that yet.”

“Good,” she said. “I wouldn’t have liked it if you left.”

“I know. Who’d do the dishes, right?” I said somewhat snidely.

“No, it’s not that,” she said—but didn’t say anything more. Ed and I looked at each other, and went back to the dishes.

“I remember my junior prom,” she said after a while.

“You **do**?” I said.

“Yeah. It’s kind of hard to forget. It was the night I got pregnant.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Do you love him?” she asked me, pointing at Ed.

“Yeah.”

“You love her?” she asked Ed.

“Yes, I do,” he said.

“You guys sleep together yet?” she asked.

“Mom, I don’t think that’s any of your business,” I told her.

“I’m asking this for a reason.” She stood up and walked over into the kitchen. “You’ve been with him for three days, so I’m assuming you have.”

“Yes. OK. We have.”

“So you’ve already slept with him. And he’s in here helping you do **my** dirty dishes. Good. He stood up for you with me the other night, and now he’s helping you clean. Any guy who’ll do that isn’t just out for one thing.” I was amazed at this. “You’ve got me thinking about my junior prom, as I said. I loved your father, you know. Loved him with all my heart. And I was the same age that you are now, so you can’t tell me it wasn’t real.”

“No,” I agreed.

“And he let me down. He let me down hard.” She looked at Ed. “You’d better not fucking let her down,” she said. As I looked at her in complete astonishment, she nodded her head, and then shuffled off towards the bathroom.

“Oh my God, I think I’m going to faint,” I said.

“That’s OK.” He picked up the sprayer. “I’ll just set it to ice-cold. It’ll be a short faint.

“Don’t you **dare!**” I laughed.

“If you’re going to be fainting, it’d better be from **this**,” he said—and then he grabbed me and kissed me.

“Oh, **swoon**,” I said with a giggle, and then kissed him again. Midway through some nice heavy lip-locking, I heard a chuckle. I broke the kiss, and looked back and saw Mom again.

“Oh, don’t stop on **my** account,” she chuckled. I just looked at her, astonished.

“Mom, are you ill?”

“No,” she chuckled. “Well, I won’t be as soon as the Pepto and the Advil I just took kick in.” I laughed. She looked at me. “Like I said, I was thinking about my prom. When your father left me, I stopped believing in love. And the way my life turned out didn’t help—you **don’t** see much canoodling over dirty dishes at Doc’s.” I giggled at that. “And I never showed **you** much love, either,” she admitted. “How is it you still believe in it?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m not sure I did. It just happened. I can’t not believe in something I know I’m feeling, can I?”

“Hey, I hadn’t believed in love for two years until I met Natalie,” Ed said. “It’s a long story, but let’s just say I had a very bad experience. But then I met Natalie, and it happened, and I couldn’t deny it anymore, like she said.”

Mom had sat down at the kitchen table. “The problem with love is, if you’re not careful, it turns into obligation. And you’d **better** believe in love when you’re confronted with the obligations. If you don’t, you screw up. Badly,” she admitted. “You’re still on the pill, right?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I told her.

“Good. Stay away from obligations until you can handle them, OK?” she said sadly.

“Mother,” I told her, “you’re probably not going to like what I have to say, but—if I was shying away from my obligations, I wouldn’t have come home at all.”

She looked at me in surprise. Then she settled down. “You see me as an obligation. You feel obliged to cook, clean, do all those things.”

“Yes,” I said.

“I suppose that’s only fair, because I’ve been treating you like one since the day you were born.” She looked up at me. “What can I do?”

WHAT? I **was** going to faint. “Huh?” was what I said.

“What can I do so—you know—you feel less obligated to come home?”

I didn’t believe it. I **didn’t** believe it. “First, stop hitting me, and stop threatening me.”

“Done,” she said simply. “What else?”

Wow. Was it **that** easy? Should I go for the crux of the matter? Why not? “I think things would be a whole lot better for me around here—and for **you**, for that matter—if you’d make an attempt to cut down on your drinking.”

She sighed. “That’s going to be harder. I can only promise to try.”

“They run AA meetings in town,” Ed spoke up. “My Uncle’s a recovering alcoholic, I can get you the details if you’re interested.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “Maybe. Let me try on my own first. If that doesn’t work, I’ll take you up on it.” She sighed. “I really thought you had gone, you know. I saw you Thursday night, you left me a note Friday morning, and then I don’t hear from you. I figured you were gone.” She sighed again. “And, at first, I was pissed. Then I realized, I couldn’t blame you.” She stood up and looked at me. “I couldn’t blame you at all. If I were you, I’d have left a long time ago.” She started walking towards her bedroom. Then

she stopped, and said, very softly, so I barely heard it, "I'm glad you came back." Then she walked into her bedroom.

I collapsed, crying, on the floor, in complete disbelief. I couldn't believe she actually **said** that. Ed came down on the floor next to me, and held me as I cried. After I calmed down, he smiled at me, and said, "Honey, I think you need to disappear for three days more often!"

"Jeez, I know, huh?" I sniffled. "I suppose, in a way, it's pathetic."

"What is?" he asked.

"That 'I'm glad you came back' are the nicest words I've ever heard from my mother."

"Baby steps, Natalie, baby steps. You know?"

"Yeah," I agreed. We got up off the floor and went back to the cleaning. After we were done, and the place looked pretty good, I looked at Ed and said, "You know what? I'm starving. I know your mom made a nice breakfast, but that was a few hours ago." I looked in the refrigerator. "Unfortunately, it must be time for me to go shopping, because there's nothing in here."

"How's pizza sound?" Ed asked.

"Heavenly," I grinned. He grabbed the phone and ordered it.

While we waited, we went into the living room. Ed found my video collection, and put in The Sound Of Music. The pizza came, and we were munching on it, snuggling on the couch, watching the movie, when Mom came out of the bedroom. She had gotten dressed, and looked better. She went into the kitchen, made a cup of tea, and then came into the living room, sitting in the chair.

"The Sound Of Music?" she asked.

"Yeah, Ed's an old film buff, too," I said.

"Yes, you told me that," she said. "The other night."

"That night was our first sort-of date," I giggled, "and he showed me Singing In The Rain, which I hadn't ever seen, which is his favorite."

"Would you like some pizza?" Ed said thoughtfully. "There's plenty."

"Ugh," she grinned. "Thank you for the offer, Ed, but I think I'll stick with tea, the way my stomach feels."

The movie was up to the part where Maria and the children are in the bed singing.

“Julie Andrews in a nightgown. Hubba-hubba,” Ed joked.

“Yeah, right,” I grinned at him. “That nightgown is less revealing than the straightjackets I used to wear.”

“Used to?” Mom said. “When did you **stop**?”

“Friday,” I laughed. “While Ed was at baseball practice, I borrowed his car and went to the mall, and put a major dent in my trust fund.”

“Well, that’s what your grandparents wanted you to use it for,” Mom said.

“I came out of practice, saw her, and almost swallowed my tongue,” Ed laughed.
“Though I’ve only seen that one outfit.”

“Good point,” I grinned. “You know what? This shirt is still wet. I’ll go change.” I kissed him and ran into my bedroom.

“I think we’re getting a fashion show,” I heard Mom say through the wall.

“I think you’re right,” Ed agreed with a laugh. I chose a light blue spaghetti-strap low-cut tank top, and a navy blue flared miniskirt. Light blue bra and panties. I was back out in a flash.

“Oy,” Ed said with a huge grin. “I’m gonna have a coronary.”

“I’m glad you like it,” I grinned back.

“When are the auditions?” he asked.

“Auditions?”

“Yeah, for the Miss Teen Cleavage beauty pageant.”

I laughed, and swatted him. “You be nice.”

“I’m **always** nice. I’m a sweetheart, remember?”

“Keep telling me that and someday I’ll believe it,” I teased.

I happened to glance at Mom. She was staring at me.

“Mom?” I asked.

“You know something? I put you in the program for **all** the wrong reasons. But if it made you **this** at ease with your body in just a week, maybe I did something right after all.”

“Well, I have to admit. The Program helped, but it was mostly Ed,” I smiled.

“Good for Ed,” she laughed. “You really do look nice,” she managed.

“Thanks,” I grinned.

She watched the rest of the movie with us. I actually enjoyed it.

Afterwards, she went to work. So, we were alone in the apartment. Did we take advantage of it? What do you think?

The funny thing was—the only article of clothing that Ed took off me was my panties. He fucked my brains out with my tank top and bra still on, and my skirt bunched up around my waist. He **really** liked that outfit!

So, that’s the story of Ed’s and my week in The Program. Looking back on it, it almost seemed like a month rather than a week, so much had happened. For both of us. It was quite a week—one I don’t think either of us will ever forget.

We gathered at the entrance to school on Monday morning clothed. Though, I must say, what I was wearing was closer to naked than my old straightjacket outfits! Will I ever pull a Jared and Amanda and go nude for the hell of it? I might. Ed and I have talked about that. We both found it liberating at times. But we also appreciate the ‘hint’ of a sexy outfit. Both ways are fun.

And a good friend of ours was about to find out the fun of nudity. As Ed and I and his gang gathered outside the school Monday morning, we heard, over the loudspeaker, “Frankie Gutierrez, please report to Mr. Tilling’s office.”

Yup, it was Frankie’s turn!

--Fin--

