

Prologue

‘You want to?’ Jordan asked.

Jordan had this sultry, slurry way of speaking that made it sound less like a question and more like an exotic name – *Yawanna*. And that mouth . . . God. It made Naomi blush a little, watching it move around the words.

It had to be the beer and the pot because Naomi never thought like this. Sometimes, the girls at Santa Beatriz would look at pictures of Justin Timberlake or Enrique Iglesias or maybe some guy from a *telenovella*, and they’d say, *Le quiero* . . . I want him . . . And yeah, Naomi would nod and all, but she wouldn’t get it. Not really.

At seventeen, she’d been with a guy just once. It was horrible. She wasn’t big on dating either, and Justin, Enrique, all those two-dimensional boys in magazines, on TV screens – they did nothing for her at all. For a while now, Naomi had been secretly thinking there might be something wrong with her because she couldn’t even *understand* what it meant to want another person – want him the way you’d want new clothes, the way you’d want a glass of ice water after hiking straight uphill in the sun.

But now . . . Now she understood.

‘I promise,’ said Jordan. ‘You’ll love it.’

Naomi’s skin heated up. Her face flushed a deep red that she was certain he noticed, even from across the

bonfire and with the desert sky darkening into that end-of-day color, that melony pink. She could blame it on the beer or the heat from the fire, but still he would know. The way he was looking at her, he just *would* . . .

But then Corinne said, 'Doesn't it make you puke?' And suddenly, it was as if the other two people around the fire – Naomi's American friends, down in San Esteban for summer break – had materialized out of nowhere.

Corinne's boyfriend, Sean, handed Jordan the joint, and he took a hit. 'Puking is part of the experience,' Jordan said. He was half holding his breath to keep the smoke in, so the words kind of snuck out of his throat. God help Naomi, he even inhaled sexy. She flashed on the Baggie he held in his other hand, at the shriveled gray disks inside, and thought, *Right. He's talking about peyote. That's what he means by 'the experience.'*

'I'll try it,' she heard herself say, shocking everyone around the fire, especially herself. Naomi was a lightweight. One beer, three hits of pot and already she was a red-faced, trembling basket case with an embarrassing crush on Corinne's cousin. The last thing she needed was hallucinogenic cactus buttons.

'Are you sure, Naomi?' said Sean, as if he were reading her mind.

But when she looked at Jordan, when she saw the way he smiled at her, the way his eyes glittered under those half-closed lids . . . Oh, she was sure. So sure that she'd say it again, over and over, and then eat everything in the Baggie without taking a breath, even if it made her puke her guts out and go completely insane. She'd do it all if she could just get Jordan alone for a few minutes, if she could get close enough to touch the side of his face, to feel those soft lips against her neck, to explore these brand-new feelings . . .

'You won't be sorry,' Jordan said. And Naomi knew he was right.

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So strange how life worked. How it could be chugging along, same old boring life it always was, and then something, some small part of it, would turn just a little and a screw would fall out . . .

Jordan was visiting from New York. But unlike Sean and Corinne – both of whose grandparents lived here year-round – he wouldn't be staying in San Esteban for the summer, or even for the week. Guys like this – they were always *just passing through*, weren't they?

Naomi had met him earlier that day, in the *jardin*. She'd been walking to the *biblioteca* with her aunt Vanessa. 'Corinne should be down here soon, right?' Vanessa had said.

And then, just like that, Corinne's Texan accent: 'Naomi!' As if her aunt had conjured her or something. When Naomi turned, there was her friend, just in from Austin, standing next to a cute American boy who was not Sean and had to be at least nineteen. 'This is my cousin Jordan,' she'd said. 'He's visiting from New York. He goes to NYU. I'm going to the doctor because I forgot my allergy pills, and Jordan is coming with me because he is sooo sweet. Aren't you, Jordan?'

'That's embarrassing, Corinne,' he said.

Jordan was about two inches shorter than Naomi, but that didn't bother her. At five foot eleven, she towered over most Mexican guys. He had long eyelashes, shiny brown hair and a dimpled smile. He smelled like cocoa butter and soap. He wore khaki shorts and flip-flops and a white T-shirt that set off his tanned skin, made it glow a little. Definitely a hottie, but there was something else about his face – a sort of sadness. Naomi couldn't explain why, but that was what got to her the most.

'Hi,' Jordan said. To Vanessa. Of course.

Naomi had been living with Vanessa for two years, ever since her mom had died, and she was used to her aunt getting all the attention. She'd always been

what guys call smokin' and at fifty-five she still was, with her toned body and her sculpted cheekbones and her flowing, highlighted hair, but it was more than that. Vanessa was famous. A supergroupie back in her youth, she'd written a bestselling tell-all seven years ago that had landed her on all the talk shows and made enough money to buy her a mansion in San Esteban, plus keep her in liposuction for the rest of the foreseeable future.

Like all famous people, Vanessa had that airbrushed look, that sheen of perfection that made people stare. And when people actually recognized her, when they knew she was famous for screwing, like, every male rock star from the seventies who wasn't Freddie Mercury, well . . . then they were even more interested.

'Naomi's aunt is Vanessa St James,' Corinne told Jordan.

'Right.'

'She wrote *Backstage Passes and Hot Licks*,' Corinne said. 'I so loved that book!'

'Corinne, your parents should not be letting you read that trash,' Vanessa said.

Naomi couldn't help but roll her eyes. Vanessa used that line with everybody, regardless of their age.

'Nice to meet you, honey,' Vanessa said.

'Actually,' Jordan said, 'we've met before. I was visiting my aunt Patty. Four years ago? Remember?'

Vanessa peered at him. 'Oh my goodness . . . Yes! You were just a little *boy* back then!' She broke into an electric smile. Her fiery gaze slid up the length of his body, resting just before it hit the face. 'You have really grown *up*!'

Naomi wanted to gag.

'How long are you in town?' Vanessa asked.

'He's leaving tomorrow,' said Corinne.

'That's a shame.'

Jordan said, 'You live here all year-round?'

Vanessa didn't respond – and then, with a visible start, Naomi realized he was talking to her. 'Uh . . . yeah. I do.'

'You speak Spanish?'

She nodded.

'I'm hanging with you, then. Corinne doesn't even know how to get a taxi.'

'Shut up, Jordan. That is not true.'

Naomi felt herself smiling. 'You guys want to do a bonfire tonight?'

'Definitely,' said Corinne. 'I can't wait.'

Jordan said, 'Me neither.' He caught Naomi's eye, and while Vanessa asked after Corinne's grandmother Patty, the two of them stood there, staring at each other as if they were the only two people in the world. Jordan's eyes were a shade of gold, and seemed so much older than the rest of him. As he watched Naomi, the sadness within them grew and deepened into something else, something bigger . . . *What's wrong?* Naomi wanted to say. *You can tell me, and whatever it is, I will understand. I will help.*

'See you later,' Jordan said.

'Sure.'

After they walked away, Naomi took in the spot where Jordan had stood, a warmth spreading through her like a rash. 'Better be careful,' said Vanessa. 'That one's a heartbreaker.'

Naomi stared at the two peyote buttons in her hand. They looked like slices of two hundred-year-old squash, with little purple hairs poking out the sides.

'I can't believe you're going to eat that,' said Corinne.

Naomi ignored her, which was easy to do, seeing as less than twenty feet away, Sean was making sounds like a dying yak. He'd eaten his buttons around half an hour ago and that he was now violently puking – a six-foot-five-inch football player with a neck the size of a

Christmas ham – was not what you'd call good advertising for the peyote experience.

'Don't worry,' said Jordan.

Naomi looked at him. His face was serene. 'If there's nothing to worry about,' she said, 'why don't you take it?'

He smiled. 'Already did.'

'But you're not . . .'

'Throwing up? You don't always.' His mouth tilted into a half-smile. 'If you eat yours now, we can still peak at the same time.'

That pretty much sealed the deal.

Naomi held her nose, then popped both buttons into her mouth and chewed them up, fast as she could. As it turned out, peyote tasted the way cat crap smelled, only worse. She gagged instantly. *I will not throw up in front of him.* Naomi thought of a framed concert photo in Vanessa's bedroom – Ozzy Osbourne, taken just after he'd bitten the head off a live bat.

At least peyote didn't bleed.

'There's something about you, Naomi,' said Jordan.

The vaguest compliment she'd ever received, and yet at this moment, the most wonderful . . . *Don't throw up, don't throw up.* She swallowed the last awful bit and took a swig from Corinne's bottle of water.

'Thanks,' Naomi said, but she couldn't look at him. What if she looked at him and puked, and he took it personally? What if he got so grossed out he never spoke to her again? She closed her eyes tight, rubbed the lids with the palms of her hands. This had always calmed her down, ever since she had been a little girl, and after a time (ten minutes? twenty? forty-five?) the nausea passed, and she was safe.

She opened her eyes, gazed across the fire at Jordan.

'Whew. Thought I lost you there for a second.' He grinned – but in his eyes, still that deep, mysterious sorrow. The combination was close to overwhelming.

Naomi's heart swelled so big, her ribs could barely contain it. She inhaled the sweet smell of burning mesquite as the dried cactus worked into her system, and the sun melted away, the sky turning a deep soft purple, the air starting to cool and swirl . . . *Please get up and sit next to me, please, please, please . . .* 'I'm cold,' Naomi said. But the voice she heard was not her own. It was the voice of a ghost.

'Oh, man,' Sean was saying. 'I can see . . . Right here, in the dirt, it's like . . . some kind of latticework structure leading down into the center of the earth, like a secret civilization or . . .'

Corinne said, 'Excuse me, but did you just seriously say, "latticework structure"?' and then Jordan stood up and moved behind Naomi and sat down next to her, putting his arm around her shoulder. *Thank you.*

'Better?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Hitting you yet?' His voice was warm against the side of her neck. His hand stroked her arm, and when she looked down at it, she saw thousands of shimmering fish scales.

'Uh, I think so.'

He exhaled, the breath breaking on her skin and curling, like a wave. 'Puts you in touch with the nagual,' he said.

'Huh?'

'You know. Castaneda's nagual. The indefinable. The left side of the . . .'

Naomi gulped. *Castaneda*. Who was that? Oh, right . . . Vanessa had a whole shelf of those books, but not once had Naomi thought of reading one. She couldn't even remember Castaneda's first name. She tried envisioning the books, the author's name on the spines, but all she could recall were the two huge pink crystals Vanessa used to keep them in place . . . What a stupid high school girl she was.

‘... because Don Juan said the true warrior ...’

Naomi gritted her teeth. Why wasn't he talking about latticework structures? At least she *knew* what latticework was ... *Think of the spines ...*

‘I'm talking too much, aren't I?’ said Jordan. And suddenly, the name appeared in her brain, sparkling as if a thousand silver stars were glued to the letters ...

‘Carlos Castaneda!’

Jordan said, ‘You are really cute.’

Naomi turned to see his face much closer than she'd expected – about two inches away from her own, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth. She ignored all the scales, gazing only at the eyes, those sad golden eyes. He gave her the lightest, softest kiss imaginable, and then he leaned back and just looked at her, saying nothing, the heat of him lingering on her lips.

‘Wow,’ she said. Like a gargantuan dork.

The scales glistened in the firelight – kind of gorgeous really, in an exotic, god-of-the-sea way – and Naomi wanted to melt into Jordan right there. She wanted to lose her own shape and turn to liquid, soak into those scales and become a part of him forever and ever as he moved through the ocean waves, and oh, was Naomi ever glad she wasn't saying this out loud. Seriously, *wow* was bad enough, but *this* ...

Naomi caught a sudden chill up her back, as if someone was watching her, someone in the darkness, and when she glanced around the fire, she saw Corinne and Sean were gone. *When did they leave? A minute ago? An hour?* Time wasn't moving the way it was supposed to. It half rushed, half oozed, like those clocks in Salvador Dalí paintings.

‘Are you okay?’ Jordan asked.

‘Yeah.’ She closed her eyes, started rubbing them again. ‘I'm ... I'm fine. I'm just ... I ...’ Naomi's heart was doing this weird jumping thing. It reminded her of Vanessa's washing machine, how it always hopped up

and down on the tile floor once the spin cycle started, shaking her aunt's entire laundry room and kitchen. *Jesús H. Christ*, Vanessa would say, *it's like there's an obese robot doing the pogo in there.*

That was what Naomi's heart felt like – a chubby little robot, hopping around inside her chest, only scary-fast. She started to think, *What if my heart explodes?* Because that really did happen to some people, didn't it? They could be doing something perfectly normal – shopping for groceries or whatever – and one of their internal organs would up and explode.

'Naomi?' Jordan said.

She was sure she'd read about this on the Net. Exploding organs, caused by some rare, undetected childhood condition. Undetected. Meaning you didn't *know* about it – *nobody* knew about it until it was *too late*. She heard herself say, 'I think I need to see a doctor.'

'A doctor?'

What if Naomi had a rare, undetected childhood condition, and her heart exploded from it right now? What would it feel like, that half-second just before it happened, that moment of *knowing*?

'It can hit you hard the first time,' said Jordan.

'I'm . . . I feel like . . .'

'I know. I feel weird too. Just try and go with it.' Jordan took one of her wrists, gently moved her hands from her eyes. Her vision was blurry from all the rubbing, so she blinked a few times. Her hands and arms were glowing pink, like they were made from neon. 'Take a deep breath,' Jordan said, 'in and out . . .'

Naomi did. Her heart slowed a little. She looked at the fire and saw . . . just a fire. No scales or neon or tentacles.

'Better?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Thanks.' And for a long time, they sat there, just breathing.

‘Jordan?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do you . . . do you have to leave tomorrow? I mean . . . could you maybe stay a couple more—’

‘Listen, Naomi,’ said Jordan. ‘I wasn’t going to say anything but . . .’ His words trailed into the smoke.

‘What?’ *You can tell me and whatever it is . . .*

Jordan sighed. It was a labored sigh, the way a sick person would breathe. When he finally spoke, his voice trembled. ‘This town. San Esteban. I know it’s beautiful on the surface, but it is really fucked up. There’s . . . weird stuff going on, stuff I’m guessing you don’t know about.’

That wasn’t what she’d expected him to say at all. ‘What kind of stuff?’ Her heart started to jump again. With each word, it wedged farther into her throat.

‘I never should have come back here. And you . . .’ he said. ‘You’re young. You need to be careful.’

She could now feel her heartbeat in her ears, her lips, her throat. She swallowed hard to tamp it down. ‘You’re trying to mess with my head, aren’t you?’

‘I’m sorry. Forget I ever said anything. I’m just . . . I’m tripping, is all.’

She turned, looked at Jordan’s face. She started to tell him it was okay, just don’t do it again. But then two long white fangs emerged from his mouth, a forked snake’s tongue darting out between them. ‘Sssssssorry,’ he hissed.

Without thinking, she was up on her feet, running away from the fire, away from Jordan, who was hissing her name. Scrubby plants scratched at her legs and loose dirt flew into her face, rocks pushing through the thin soles of her sandals. It was as if the whole desert was trying to hurt her, and then there were those footsteps nearing, Jordan howling, ‘Come back!’ Jordan the Fanged Snake.

Naomi kept running, but her heart . . . It started

slamming into her ribs, slamming hard, as if it wanted out now. Naomi thought, *It's about to explode.*

It was the last thought she had before everything went black.

Naomi dreamed of an angel standing over her. *You are safe*, the angel said. And then there was a spotlight aimed at her face. When she cracked her eyelids, Naomi saw the spotlight was the hot sun, and she was thirstier than she'd ever been in her life. Her tongue felt like a wad of dried clay, too big for her mouth. Her eyes stung terribly and her skin throbbed – her face, her neck, the tops of her legs. She had no idea about the time, but from where the sun was in the sky, she figured it was at least ten in the morning. And Naomi was lying on her back with third-degree sunburn in the middle of an agave patch, somewhere in the desert that bordered San Esteban.

'Hello?' she called out. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Corinne and Sean – they had to be looking for her, right? Unless they'd gotten lost too. And Vanessa . . . she would be freaking out for sure.

Naomi struggled to her feet as last night flew back at her – some of it, anyway. That whole exploding organ thing . . . What had she been thinking, doing peyote with a college student? What had made her think she could *handle* that?

'Great,' Naomi said to no one. Her lips stuck to her teeth. She ran her tongue over them. They were cracked and crusty and tasted like salt. She recalled, for a moment, what Jordan had said, about weird stuff going on in San Esteban. She thought about his sad, knowing eyes, how he had called after her as she'd run away . . .

Best not to think about Jordan anymore.

She had to find the path, the dead bonfire, something she could identify so she could get on the

trail that led to town. She had to make sure everybody made it back okay, and apologize to Vanessa and cry on her shoulder until her aunt felt needed enough to leave Naomi alone.

Then, finally, Naomi could do what she really wanted to do, which was smear aloe vera all over her body and drink every bottle of water in the house and get into her bed with the stuffed turtle she'd had since childhood and sleep for a week or, better yet, the entire summer.

She stumbled between the cactuses and through a sparse area, dusted with tumbleweed, empty Pepsi cans and a few sick-looking prickly pears, Bimbo Bread wrappers stuck to their quills. She tried to remember landmarks around the bonfire. She and Corinne always made their bonfires in areas that were easy to distinguish – near something tall like a jacaranda tree or a century plant – so they'd be able to find their way back to it should they wander. But this time, they'd let the boys choose the place. Dumb idea.

She kept walking, trying to ignore the vicious headache, that swimmy feeling, like she might pass out all over again.

Finally, she saw something that might have been the bonfire. It was about thirty feet away, near a blooming century plant, even though she hadn't remembered one of them being there last night. Century blooms were incredibly distinct-looking – they shot into the air like cell phone towers, thirty, forty feet high, bright yellow blossoms clinging to their sides like an afterthought . . . Usually, if you set up camp near one, you remembered it. But then again, there was a lot about last night she didn't remember. She moved closer, hoping for the bonfire with her whole body. Before she realized it, she was in a desperate, stumbling run.

Ten feet away, though, she knew it wasn't the bonfire. *Could be a pile of old clothes*, she thought. Until the smell socked her in the face.

She heard the hum of flies first. Then she saw the splayed legs, the outstretched arms, the blood, so much of it, so dark it was close to black . . . He was still wearing his flip-flops, but the rest of him was . . .

Jordan! It came out a scream – an animal scream that ripped open her raw throat and tore at her insides and used all the breath in her body . . . A scream that made her think she might lose her mind right here in this spot – because it couldn't get worse, nothing could ever be worse than what she was looking at . . .

And then she saw Jordan's heart.