

ELEMENT

Part 1

By

CM Doporto

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CM Doporto

Element

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Thank you for your support.

For my husband,
thank you for sharing your dream with me and helping me make my dream come true.
You are the love of my life.

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About the Author

Chapter 1: New Beginnings

“Ladies and gentlemen we are approaching a storm and it’s going to be a little rough until we clear it.” The captain announced. “Please stay seated and turn off all electrical devices immediately. Thank you.”

Natalie looked out the small oval window. Raindrops smeared across it, dancing their way to the side. Lightning flashed and she shuddered. She hated flying when there was a storm. For a moment, she wished she would have taken the later flight, but she wanted to get back early since classes resumed tomorrow. She reminded herself that she had a great Spring Break in Chicago with her family and ending it with her cousin’s fairytale wedding made it all worth it.

A sudden jolt called her attention back to the situation at hand. The plane shook and rattled as it flew on the edge of thick, dark clouds. Within seconds, darkness consumed the plane and the day turned into night. Out in the blackness of the sky she saw powerful flashes of light stretching out like tentacles waiting for the plane to enter. She pulled the blanket closer to her, clutching it up against her chest, somehow hoping it would calm the drumming of her heart.

“What the —” she blurted out when the plane hit another patch of rough turbulence. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

A horrible rumble echoed through the plane as it wavered from side to side. Gasps and sighs along with people begging and pleading to God were heard throughout the plane. She swallowed hard, feeling the vitamins she took ten minutes ago ease their way up. Without warning, the plane dropped several feet. Her heart hit the bottom of her stomach. An alarm sounded and emergency instructions echoed through the overhead speakers. Gasping for air, she grabbed the arm rests and her body stiffened. Her eyes stayed fixed on the flashing red and white lights above her head. *Please God, don’t let me die! Please.*

“Natalie... Natalie, wake up. You’re having another nightmare.” Her college roommate, Lise, shook her several times before she finally awoke.

“What?” She sprung up in her bed. Sweat trickled down the sides of her forehead and she breathed heavily.

“You’re okay. It was just a nightmare.” Lise turned on a bedside lamp and then sat down next to her.

It took her a few seconds to realize that she had been dreaming. She wiped the sweat away and the pounding of her heart turned into a slow thud. She flopped back onto the bed and took a few deep breaths. "I don't know why I keep having these darn nightmares."

"I do." Lise replied.

Natalie looked at her. "You do?"

"Uh, yeah... because you said you nearly died on that plane. You're probably experiencing post stress or something like that."

Natalie swallowed hard. She couldn't be experiencing post-traumatic stress because only soldiers suffer from things like that, right? "No, I don't think so. I mean, it was horrible and scary but..."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lise's green eyes softened.

"What is there to talk about?" Natalie sat up. She hadn't told anyone the full details about what she experienced on the plane, including her parents. She wasn't about to tell Lise either.

"Sometimes it's good to talk about horrible events. It can help you get over them." Lise played with the edge of her t-shirt, rolling it up.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine." She glanced over at the clock on the window ledge. "I guess we should start getting dressed."

Lise turned and looked at the clock. "Crap, I don't want to be late."

Natalie threw back the covers. "Neither do I. First impressions are everything."

Lise kicked Natalie's foot under the table. "That guy keeps looking over here. He is way too cute."

Natalie adjusted her glasses and did a quick glance over to where the guy sat. "I think I know him."

She leaned in closer to Natalie. "You do? From where?"

"I went to high school with him." Natalie shot another quick glance to make sure.

"You did. How lucky can you be? Did you ever go out with him?" Lise whispered.

Natalie put her hand in front of her mouth, to muffle her words. "No. He had a girlfriend. I don't even think he knows who I am."

“Well, the guy sitting next to him is cute too.” Lise played with her hair, twirling it around her finger while glancing up occasionally at them.

She nudged Lise’s arm. “Quit staring. They know we’re talking about them.”

Lise huffed and rolled her eyes, eventually turning her attention back to the front of the room. Ms. Thompson, the human resource representative for Kronberg Laboratories, spoke in a low monotone voice. After two hours of literally reading Power Point slides, she had half the room yawning, including Natalie.

The door opened and a middle aged man with salt and pepper hair sauntered into the conference room. Everyone sat up straight. It was as though he demanded everyone’s undivided attention without speaking a word.

“Mr. Hayle. I, uhhh, didn’t realize you were stopping by.” Ms. Thompson quickly perked up when she saw the sleek suited man. “Everyone, this is Mr. Russ Hayle, CEO & President of Hayle Industries and Kronberg Laboratories.”

The room erupted into a welcoming cheer. Natalie clapped her hands and stood up, like everyone else but something about him rubbed her the wrong way. Maybe it was the way he flaunted his arrogance like a proud king over his country. Prior to applying for the internship, she had done her research on this business tycoon. Although he impressed her with the empire he had built, Dr. Albin Kronberg, the scientist behind the natural supplement line, had her full attention. She couldn’t wait to meet him. Especially since she had been testing out some of his products and would be interning in his lab.

“Thank you. Thank you.” He held up one hand in the air, in a dictatorial manner. The clapping came to an abrupt stop. “I know everyone is getting great information from Ms. Thompson but I wanted to take the time and welcome each of you. This is the largest summer internship group we have hired since opening our doors.” He surveyed the room, meeting the eyes of several students. “We are expecting wonderful results from each of you in this program. While this is only a summer program, many of you will be offered an opportunity to continue working here while you pursue your college education. The rest of you may not. It all depends on your performance and I expect the best from each and every person whether you are an intern or an executive.”

Mr. Hayle continued with his elaborate and somewhat parental speech. She listened carefully, like a good student should. Even though he was an excellent speaker, he lacked in his

ability to be personable and it made her feel distant rather than welcomed. Regardless, this internship was an opportunity of a lifetime. She would learn everything she could while working there.

“As a way to welcome each of you, I am inviting you to the VIP grand opening of The Regal on Sixth Street tonight.” He pulled out a stack of cards and handed them to Ms. Thompson. “I hope to see everyone there. Good luck to each of you.” He gave a quick wave and walked out the door.

“OMG. He is uber cool. I can’t believe I’m actually interning here.” Lise wiggled in her seat, smiling.

“Me either.” Natalie watched Mr. Hayle walk out of the room.

“That should wrap up orientation. Does anyone have any questions?” Ms. Thompson asked, taking her reading glasses off. “No? I guess we are done. If you need anything, my contact information is listed in your folder. I’ll stay around for a while if you have any questions. The passes for the VIP party are here in front.” She laid the cards down on the table in front of her.

Before Natalie could even get out of her seat, Lise had already made her way to the front of the room collecting a few passes. Natalie placed her folder in her backpack and zipped it up and waited for Lise.

“I know where we’re going tonight.” Lise held up the passes in front of her.

Natalie shook her head and put her purse on her shoulder. “Hmmm, I don't know.”

“Oh, come on. Don't be a party pooper. ” Lise put her hands on her hips and pouted her lower lip.

“Excuse me.”

Natalie and Lise both turned their heads in the direction of the deep, raspy voice. Standing in front of them were the two guys from across the room. Both of them wore button down shirts and slacks that clung to their well-defined bodies. They looked like they had just finished a photo shoot for an ad in a magazine.

“Yes?” Lise smiled, her cheeks turning a slight rosy color.

Natalie tried to speak, but her voice caught low in her throat. Her heart raced and she swore it pumped so loud that everyone could hear it. *Say something. Anything.*

“Hello, I’m Ryan.” He stuck out his hand but she couldn’t move. Every muscle in her body tensed, including her eyes. They were fixed on him, like he had cast a spell upon her unknowingly.

“I’m Lise Turner.” She reached out her hand, nudging Natalie as she shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you Lise.” He gave her a friendly shake.

Lise turned to the other guy. “And you are?”

“I’m Sal Rodriguez. Nice to meet you.” He had short, dark hair and an olive skin tone that hinted he must be Hispanic. His style was slightly more rugged than his friend’s with a five o’clock shadow.

“Ryan? Ryan Garrett? Go Bullfrogs?” Natalie hesitated, not wanting to be wrong. If her instincts were correct, which they usually were, she knew who he was. He was the high school football star that every girl drooled over, including herself. *What was he doing there at UT Austin?* Last she had heard he went to TCU.

“Yeah, I thought I knew you from somewhere.” He held up his finger, pointing at her. “I’m sorry, I forgot your name.”

“Natalie. Natalie Vega.” She stuttered the words out, feeling like a complete idiot.

“Nice to meet ya.” His Texas drawl, coupled with his one dimpled smile, made her want to melt into the floor. He held his hand out again in front of her. She reached for his hand and the moment her skin touched his, a surge of energy penetrated her. A wave of dizziness flowed through her body. She stumbled backward trying to keep her balance.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ryan reached forward and caught her in his arms, before she fell back. When she felt the warmth of his embrace, everything went limp and she struggled to gain focus. A flush of heat flowed up her body, numbing her and seizing her breath. He scooped her up with little effort. Her face rested perfectly in the curve of his neck, allowing his manly scent to infiltrate her airways. It stirred up emotions she’d never felt before.

“Nat? Are you alright? Do I need to call 911?” Lise spat off a thousand questions. She tried to speak, but couldn’t get her throat to unclench. She shook her head.

She heard Sal take charge. “Come on everyone, give her some room. Can somebody get some cold water for her, please?”

Ryan lay her down gently on top of one of the tables in the conference room. He released his arms from around her, allowing his hand to slide up her back until he cradled her head in the palm of his hand. "Lay back for a moment. Just relax."

His voice touched a part of her that made her respond willingly and freely. "Okay." His light brown eyes caught her gaze and at that moment, something between them exchanged. It was a feeling, a relentless force, somehow bringing their souls close together. She took a few slow breaths, and with every inhalation she swore she could feel him, smell him, and literally taste him. She wondered if he felt that instant connection. By the look in his eyes, something deep within her told her he did.

"Is she okay?" Ms. Thompson interrupted their moment. When Ryan didn't respond, she turned to Natalie. "Are you okay?"

Natalie didn't answer. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off of him. It seemed like a full minute had passed before Ryan broke his gaze and turned to Ms. Thompson. "I don't know. I mean, I think she is."

She blinked a few times and gathered her senses. "Yeah... I'm okay. I got a little dizzy." She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. Then she realized the small audience gathered around them. She wanted to run out of the room, but knew that wouldn't be very smart. She struggled to get up. "I can sit up now."

"Are you sure?" He smoothed a few strands of hair away from her face.

Her heart wanted to say no, but her head told her to say yes. She wanted nothing more than to stay right there next to him. Feel the warmth of his embrace and remain within the security of his hands. Instead she responded, "Yeah."

He guided her up slowly.

"Do you need some water?" Sal handed her an icy cold water bottle.

"Thank you." She took the bottle from him, but had trouble opening it. Her hands felt like JELL-O along with everything else.

"Spoiler alert. She's fine." Sal turned around and urged the crowd to leave. Relief flowed over her. She didn't like to be the center of attention and by the size of the crowd, she had been.

"Here, allow me." Ryan took the water bottle from her hands and opened it with little effort. He handed it back to her.

"Thank you." She sipped the water slowly.

“Are you okay?” Lise took Natalie’s purse off her shoulder. Somehow she managed to keep it hanging to her side.

“I’m fine. I got dizzy for a second, that’s all.” She took another sip of water.

“Do you need us to call a doctor for you?” Ms. Thompson removed her cell phone from her belt clip.

“No. I’m fine... really, I am.” Natalie insisted.

“Okay. Take it easy. We will see you in two weeks. Let me know if anything changes. You have my number and email in your folder.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Natalie smiled at Ms. Thompson, giving her that extra reassurance. She smiled back and then walked away along with everyone else still watching.

Natalie’s heart beat rapidly and her mouth was dry as cotton, despite the cold water she continued to sip. Ryan stood right next to her, which made her feel even more nervous. What had gotten in to her? Why was she feeling this way about him? She took another sip of water and kept her head down. It really sucked feeling this way around guys. For once, she wished she could be more like Lise: outgoing, fun and not afraid to make friends.

“Are you okay now?” Ryan asked hesitantly, patting her shoulder.

“Yes... yes I am.” She nodded and then swiveled around until her legs dangled off the table.

“I hope you are, because I still want to go out tonight.” Lise reached down to pick up the VIP passes she dropped on the floor.

Sal reached down at the same time she did and they bumped heads.

“Owww.” Lise grabbed her head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t see you reach down.” Sal rubbed the top of his head. His cheeks reddened.

“It’s okay.” Lise shook it off and gave him a big smile.

She turned to Natalie. “Come on. Everyone will be there.” Lise glanced over at Ryan and Sal. “Are you two planning on going?”

Ryan shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. What about y’all?”

Natalie peeked out from behind her glasses, trying to gauge his interest. Gathering her courage, she lifted her head. “Ummm... maybe.”

“Okay. Hopefully we will see ya’ll out there tonight.” He said with a smile and a wink.

Her mouth fell open. *Did Ryan Garrett just wink at me?* She couldn't say anything, so she nodded.

"See you guys later tonight." Lise jumped up and down on the balls of her feet. She held onto the passes like they were the winning ticket to the Texas lotto.

"See you later." Sal shot Lise a half-smile. Lise fluttered her long faux eye lashes at him. She was hooked. Natalie shook her head, wondering why her roommate fell for guys so easily.

The moment the guys left the room Lise screamed, "OMG, how lucky can we get? Those are the two hottest guys I have ever seen. They have to be from that spirit club, what are they called," Lise motioned with her hands.

"Texas Cowboys?" Natalie stood up slowly; making sure the dizziness had subsided. Still feeling a little woozy, she held onto the table, since her friend was too busy reminiscing about the hotties.

"Yeah, or maybe they're football players. Did you see the muscles on them?" Lise continued to rattle on about them. "Oh, sorry. Did you need help?" Lise held out her hand.

"No. I've got it."

"What happened?" Lise picked up Natalie's backpack and purse.

"I don't know. I got dizzy all of a sudden." Natalie tried to take her purse from Lise but she pushed Natalie's hand away.

"I got it. Let's get back to the dorm, grab a bite to eat, and get ready for tonight." They made their way out of the room.

"Maybe I should stay in and rest." Natalie walked close to Lise, just in case she got dizzy again.

"What? No. You're going out. You're not staying home another night."

Natalie let out a sigh. "Lise I really don't want to talk about this right now. I want to go and lie down for a while."

Lise's shoulders sank and her backpack along with her and Lise's purse slid off both her arms. "Oh, alright. Let's get you back to the dorm."

Natalie sat up on her elbows when she heard the door open. She shielded her eyes with her hand when the light from the hallway shined onto her face.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you.” Lise shut the door softly.

“That's okay. I need to get up.” Natalie flipped her bedside lamp on. “What time is it anyways?”

“Seven, I think.” Lise flipped on the main light in the dorm room.

“Already?” She threw back the covers and sat on the side of her bed.

“Yeah, already. I did bring you something back from Texadelphia.” She sat down a brown paper bag on Natalie's desk.

“Thanks Lise. Why didn't you wake me up? I would have gone with you.”

“You were sleeping so good, I didn't want to bother you. So I went with Shannon and Macie.” She turned on the TV and then went to her closet and started going through her clothes.

“Oh good, you didn't have to eat alone.”

“So, do you think you feel like going out tonight?” She looked over her shoulder at Natalie, giving her a *please say yes* look.

“Oh, Lise, I don't think I'm up to it. Ask Shannon and Macie to go with you.”

Lise stomped her feet on the ground. “What? Come on Nat, you know I don't like going out to bars with our suite mates. They are so lame. Besides, you haven't been out since Spring break.”

“I'm sorry. I'm not ready to go out.” Natalie lay back down on her bed. She didn't want to admit that seeing her old high school crush had definitely stirred up some buried feelings.

“Not ready? What you need to do is forget about Tony and go have some fun for crying out loud. Our freshman year is ending.”

“I don't care, Lise.” Natalie grabbed her pillow and covered her head. Even though Lise was a great friend, she really didn't want to listen to her lecture about what she needed to do. She knew how to handle her split with Tony and she didn't need Lise telling her how to do it. More than anything she was afraid that if she went out she'd run into him or maybe even Ryan.

“Come on, Nat. You can't stop living your life because of him.” She tugged on the pillow, trying to uncover her face.

She shoved the pillow to the side of the bed and sat up. “I am living. He hasn't ruined my life.”

“Well, you haven’t been yourself since you broke up with him. All you do is workout, go to class, study and sleep.” Lise put her hands on her hips.

When Natalie tried to get up, she moved side to side blocking her. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting patiently for her to move. Lise continued to babble words of encouragement but she ignored her. Frustrated, she pushed Lise out of the way and got up from her bed.

“Where are you going?” Lise stumbled to the side.

Natalie didn’t answer. She walked over to her dresser and pulled out some shorts and a tank top. She changed her clothes and put on her running shoes. When she stood up, she caught her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was a stringy mess and she barely had any makeup on. She told herself she didn’t care, but decided to redo her ponytail anyway.

“I’ll be back later. I’m going to workout.” Natalie grabbed her gym bag and headed for the door.

“Wait. I ummmm... wanna go.” Lise stumbled around the room trying to find her running shoes.

She stopped and turned around. “Lise, you hate to workout. Besides, you have a great body.”

“Uhhh, no I don’t. I’ve gained at least ten pounds this semester. So I could really use your help.”

“If you say so.” Natalie raised her brows and shook her head. If only she could be as lucky as her blonde, green-eyed friend. Who happened to be naturally gifted with big boobs, a small waist and a firm butt that any girl would envy, despite her disillusionment of being overweight. The fact that Lise was almost a whole year older than her gave her a glimmer of hope.

Lise looked up from tying her shoe. “I think that class you’re taking is really making a difference. Have you checked out your legs lately?”

Natalie glanced down at her legs, flexing them and turning them from side to side. The definition in her quadriceps and calves had definitely changed. Either the working out or the supplements she had been taking was making a difference. Maybe both.

“Okay, let’s go.” Lise seemed overly enthusiastic.

They left the dorm room and walked down the hall. “I hope you can keep up with me.” Natalie let out a slight smile, looking over her shoulder. Lise trailed behind, dodging a slew of oncoming female students in the long corridor of the dorm.

By the time they made it to the common area, Lise's enthusiasm had dwindled away and a worried look formed on her face. "I've done Zumba before. I think I can keep up."

"If you say so." Natalie said holding the door open for her.

The moment they stepped outside, Lise's attention shifted. "OMG it's feels hotter out here than it did thirty minutes ago." She pulled up her hair and clipped it to the side.

Natalie wiped the sweat forming along her hairline on her forehead. "I can't imagine what this summer is going to be like." She led the way across the campus lawn.

"Brutal. That's what it will feel like. Hey, let's take the shuttle." Lise pointed to the bus stop.

"No, it's a short walk." Natalie kept going toward the gym.

"What? It's too hot to walk." Lise whined. Natalie turned around, grabbed her arm, and pulled her in the opposite direction. Poor Lise, she was always complaining and whining about something. Even though they were in central Texas, it was hard not to complain about the near hundred degree temperatures this late in the afternoon for the middle of May. No doubt, this would be a hot summer.

Lise rushed ahead of Natalie to get inside the gym. "Are you that eager to get started?" Natalie walked in behind her.

"No, I just wanted to feel this cold air." Lise stood underneath the air vent, spreading her arms out and allowing the cool air to blow down on her face.

"I hope you're not afraid to sweat." She passed by her.

Lise followed her to the free weights area. "Weights? Seriously?" She threw her hands up in the air.

"You can do whatever you want. Today, I'm lifting weights." Natalie sat her gym bag down in front of a bench and then picked up a twenty pound dumbbell. She did a few arm curls while Lise watched her.

"My God, look at your arms. What have you been taking?"

Natalie watched the bulge in her bicep enlarge with each rep she took. "Just the supplements and vitamins from Kronberg Labs, that's all."

"Are you sure there are no steroids in them?" Lise reached over and squeezed her arm.

She let out a slight laugh. "No. They are not drugs. It's only vitamins and protein along with some amino acids. Nothing else. Believe me, I wouldn't be taking them."

When she finished, Lise motioned for Natalie to give her the dumbbell. “Here, I’ll do a few.”

“Okay.” She handed Lise the weight.

“What the—,” Immediately her arm went down, nearly dropping the weight. “This is way too heavy.” She used both her hands to hold on to the weight before setting it down on the floor.

“Sorry, I thought you knew they were twenty pound weights.”

“No, I didn’t notice. I need something lighter.” Lise walked over to the rack of weights and tested out a few different weights before selecting the eight pound dumbbells. She began doing arm curls, in the same manner Natalie had done.

Natalie went over to the rack and picked up the fifteen pound weights. She walked over to a bench and kneeled down on one knee to do triceps kick-backs.

Lise did arm curls, right next to her. “You know Nat, you can’t keep going on like this...avoiding the pain. It’s not good for you. Besides, it’s been over four months now.”

“What? I’m not avoiding anything.” She did reps with her left arm. The fact was she hadn’t avoided the pain. She had cried and cried, and had even talked to her mom about what happened. Just because she hadn’t cried to Lise didn’t mean she avoided what happened. She didn’t wear her emotions on her sleeve or tell everyone her problems, like Lise did. Natalie preferred to be more private and only tell on a need to know basis.

“Then why don’t you want to go out?” Lise set the dumbbell down.

Natalie switched arms and began lifting the weight with her right arm. “I don’t care to meet any guys or get involved with anyone right now.” She had made a promise to herself not to get hurt again. Never would she let a guy deceive her like Tony did.

Lise turned away and sat down on another bench next to her. “Just because you’re going out doesn’t mean you have to hook up with anyone. Let’s go and have some fun.”

“I’m sorry, but you and I both know those guys will be there and you’re going to drag me with you so you can hang out with them. And I don’t want to.” She put the dumbbells back on the weight rack and walked over to the bench press.

Lise followed right behind her. “Oh come on, Nat. They’re nice guys and you already know Ryan.”

She ignored Lise, not saying a word. Even though Ryan was a nice guy, she couldn’t afford to get involved. She knew that something had sparked between them and if she ran into

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