

The Boys, The Men, and The One

By : **Think Pink**

These memoirs are simply for fun and because I feel that by sharing my story, people may be able to learn from some of my mistakes. Or at least laugh at them. All of the events in these chapters actually happened to me. Iâm not making any of this up :) But I have changed the names of all the guys you will read about.

Some of this will be funny, some might make you hate me, other parts might make you cry. If you have questions about anything, please donât hesitate to ask! Iâm putting a lot of myself out there so I wonât be shy about answering anything. I hope you enjoy reading about my life and the guys who have come and gone and the one who ended up sticking around.



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The Boys, The Men, and The One : Chapter 1

The One With The Tongue Ring

My first kiss happened at the age of 15.½And I'm not talking about the first time my lips came into contact with the lips of a male.½If I was to go that far back, we would be on a yellow bus heading home from fourth grade, one of the neighbor boys explaining what he had walked in on his sister doing with her boyfriend.½We felt the need to try it, of course, and ended up with our mouths pressed together as if we were fish eating algae off a glass tank.½No, I am talking about my first real kiss.½

So I had just turned 15 and finished my freshman year of high school.½My hair was cut short and I very much resembled a pre-pubescent boy, a failed attempt to pull off the pixie look.½But even though I was unbelievably awkward and had what was debatably the worst haircut in the world, I knew it was going to be a great summer.½I was returning to summer camp for what was going to be my last year as a camper and while this session was intended to turn us into the best camp councilors we could be, it was understandably difficult for 20 teenagers to focus on anything but the opposite sex.½

Most of us had been going to camp together for the last six summers and it was safe to say that we all knew each other probably a little too well.½Imagine the excitement of the girl's cabin when we heard there were two new boys our age!½We dolled ourselves up, wearing our favorite cut off shorts and tank tops, and stood impatiently at the flag outside the dining hall, each one of us looking over our shoulder toward the boy's side of camp.½

Finally they arrived in all of their puberty induced glory.½They were tall and lanky, short and pimply, trying to keep their voices from cracking, and apparently had all adopted cargo shorts as their summer uniform.½We loved them for what they were and had missed them like crazy during the school year.½Smiling and waving, I had almost forgotten there was a promise of fresh meat for us until my friend Liz elbowed me in the ribs.

"There they are," she whispered and I turned to follow her gaze.½There, at the end of the line, were the two new boys.½The first one I saw... so not what I had been expecting.½He was big, I'm talking almost six feet tall and hefty, long blonde hair waving in unkempt strands down his back and shoulders.½And he had a full beard.½Not the long, sparse whiskers that most of the guys our age called facial hair, but a real mountain-man beard.½No way could this guy be 15.½

His friend didn't impress me much either.½He was wearing baggy jeans and an oversized t-shirt with some band I didn't recognize.½His hair was parted down the middle and seemed rather unruly.½His nose was big, which at the time didn't seem like something I would particularly like but ended up becoming a rather unfortunate coincidence with most of my future boyfriends, and his feet were already covered in dirt.

Liz and I looked at each other, disappointment in our expressions.½"At least the new lifeguard is hot," I offered and Liz shrugged as we started walking into the dining hall.½We found our seats and watched as the new kids looked around and claimed the empty bench across from us as their own.½We smiled at each other awkwardly and waited until the prayer was over before bombarding them with questions.½Hey, just because we weren't excited to see them shirtless at the pool, didn't mean we were completely uninterested in them.

"Where are you two from?"½Liz broke the ice.

"California," the old man said.½

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"Where? That's a big state."

"Near San Francisco."

"Oh," Liz said in a voice that let them know exactly how bad she felt for them. "I'm originally from Los Angeles. I live in Portland now."

"Right on."

"I'm Lydia, by the way," I smiled at the two guys sitting on the other side of the table, realizing introductions had not been made.

The one with the long blonde hair pointed at himself and simply said, "Noah."

I nodded and looked at the other one expectantly. That's when he smiled and I swear, my entire perception of him changed. He looked...hot. How was it a smile could change his entire face? It didn't really matter, because this dinner table had just become so much better.

"Hey, I'm Kenny," he said, his eyes darting curiously between me and my friend.

Apparently Liz noticed his sudden transformation as well. "Kenny, hi," she said, batting her eyelashes and trying to grin seductively. "I'm Liz. And it is so nice to meet you."

Kenny smiled at her. "Is this your first year here?"

"Oh, no," Liz answered, her elbows resting on the table, her arms squeezing her boobs to make her cleavage pop. She was so embarrassing. "We've been coming since sixth grade."

"I came a few years ago," Kenny said, glancing down at Liz's revealing neckline. "Not this session, the first one."

"You mean I could have met you earlier? I feel like I've been robbed of something," she winked at him and I rolled my eyes.

"Noah, is this your first year?" I asked.

But Noah didn't hear me. He was staring off into space, his eyes glazed over. Liz and I both stared at him, wondering what he could possibly be thinking about.

"Dude," he said eventually and gestured toward the ceiling. "Look at those rafters. How cool would it be if we could, like, you know, live up there?"

Kenny laughed and Liz gasped, sounding as if she were in a considerable amount of pain.

"What happened?" I asked, concerned for my friend. But she ignored me completely.

"Kenny, what is that?" She pointed to his mouth.

Kenny's lips clamped shut but were still smiling. "What's what?" He asked through closed teeth.

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"Stick out your tongue," Liz demanded and Kenny smirked before obeying. And there it was, a titanium ball attached to a bar which went straight through his pink tongue.

"Oh. My. God. You have a tongue ring?" Her voice was shrill and attracted the attention of our entire table. I could literally see the gossip travel up each bench as all the female eyes went wide and focused on Kenny.

"Yeah," he said proudly. "Just got it last week."

"Did it hurt?" I asked, unable to avert my eyes from his mouth.

"Not at all."

Well, I didn't really believe him and was honestly a little confused by all the fuss it was creating at the table. From that point on, Kenny was bombarded with questions about his piercing and I don't think he was able to eat any of his dinner because every girl within a three table radius was coming over and asking to see it.

Later that night in the cabin, one of the other girls had to explain to me the importance of Kenny's tongue ring.

"When you kiss someone with a tongue ring, it just feels better," she stated as if I should have already known.

"But why?"

"It just does."

"It gives you something to play with," another one offered and I frowned. Something to play with? I didn't get it and wasn't going to find enlightenment from any of the girls so I shrugged my shoulders and put on my pajamas.

The next ten days were brutal for our cabin. Most of the girls were in constant competition with each other for Kenny's attention and, from what we could tell, he had been crushing on at least two of them, though no one had kissed him yet.

"I don't get it!" Liz cried. "What am I doing wrong?" She had just fallen out of his favor that night at campfire. He had been sitting with Michelle. It was heartbreaking for her.

"Does it really matter? I mean, do you even like him?"

"Not really," she pouted. "But the tongue..."

"I know. The tongue ring."

"You wouldn't understand," she said with a little venom in her voice. "Or appreciate it."

"Well, it looks like you won't be appreciating it either."

She pouted for the rest of the night.

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The next day we left our camp for another. We were going to spend three days at a camp for kids with diabetes. We were all thrilled, because we would be living, not in cabins, but in a huge teepee - all of us together, boys and girls. I had been spending more and more time with my best friend, Hannah, the only other girl who seemed to be immune to Kenny and his jewelry. Liz was slowly driving us insane and we couldn't wait to get away from her so hanging out with a bunch of ten year olds sounded like a blast at this point.

Upon arriving at the new camp, we were given a tour and asked to participate in each of the daily routines the kids had to follow. This included testing our blood sugar level. Not a big deal, I thought. If a ten year old could pierce himself with a needle and place a drop of blood onto a stick, I could do it too. But I was wrong.

The needle itself didn't hurt much, something I was very pleased with. But then I didn't bleed. It was weird. So the nurse told me to squeeze my finger which I reluctantly did. To be honest, I really just wanted to say that I was allergic to needles and blood tests of any kind which was why my finger was refusing to cooperate. But I doubt anyone would have believed me. Much to my annoyance, a drop of blood did appear once I put some pressure just above my last knuckle. Then a lot of blood came and I quickly shoved my hand in front of the nurse who dabbed it with a stick and announced I had normal blood sugar. She gave me a ball of cotton and told me to join the rest of the group outside.

Pressing the cotton to my now nearly severed finger, I walked outside and down the stairs of the infirmary.

"Are you okay?" Hannah asked, giving me a peculiar look.

"Yeah, why?" But I wasn't, I realized as the trees started to grow in front of my eyes.

"You look really pale."

That's when I nearly fainted. I remember everything going white and sitting down on the grass before I fell over. It was mortifying. I mean, what was wrong with me? It was a small drop of blood, not a gaping wound.

Hannah sat with me for the two minutes it took for me to mentally kick myself for being such a baby and then we quickly found the group and finished our tour. No one seemed to notice that I was as white as a ghost and constantly checking my finger to make sure the bleeding had indeed stopped.

But as we were settling into our teepee that night (which turned out not to be so great because it was also home to an alarming amount of earwigs), I heard a muffled voice speaking to me. Pulling the cotton from my ears, because, as you are all probably aware, earwigs crawl into your head through your ears and lay eggs in your brain, I turned around and saw Kenny doing the same thing.

"How are you feeling?"

"Grossed out, actually. You?"

Kenny laughed and I saw the glitter of his tongue ring. "It looked like you almost fainted earlier today," he clarified. "I was just wondering if you were okay."

"You saw that?" I was so embarrassed. I had thought Hannah was the only witness to my disgrace.

Kenny nodded and something in his eyes told me that he hadn't told anyone else.

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"I'm better now, thank you. I guess I just really don't like seeing my own blood."

"Good," he said with a smile and I smiled back in appreciation for his concern.

Kenny stayed pretty close over the next couple of days, even asking to sit next to me on the bus ride back to camp. I agreed, but had to put up with Liz and Noah sitting across the aisle, her laugh louder than usual as she flirted with the boy sitting next to her in an attempt to attract the boy sitting next to me.

For my part, I had no idea what I had done to deserve Kenny's affection. But he made it pretty obvious that he had made his choice. But why he would like me was a complete mystery; I didn't even think I liked myself. Plus, I still looked like a dude, no boobs or hips and super short hair. But I didn't think about it too much. Kenny was distracting, to say the least. We would sit and talk for hours and hours, sometimes a meaningful conversation, sometimes just superficial flirting.

Before any of us were ready, it was the last night of camp. Tears were being shed because for many of us, this would be our last summer together. I remember sitting next to the camp fire, crying on Hannah's shoulder when I felt Kenny, who had been holding my hand, stand up. I looked up and saw a tearful Michelle pulling him in for a long hug, nothing that really bothered me as we had all been doing the exact same thing all day.

It was her question that really irritated me. "Lydia, can I kiss your boyfriend?"

It took me a while to process what she had said. First, was she really asking my permission to kiss my boyfriend? Second, was Kenny really my boyfriend? We hadn't talked about it. Weren't we supposed to talk about it? Shouldn't there have been some sort of prior acknowledgement or conversation?

I shook the confusion from my head and stood up. Kenny was standing awkwardly between us, waiting to see if I would agree. I don't think he really wanted to kiss Michelle. I hope he didn't, so I just like to pretend he was waiting to see my reaction to her question.

"No, Michelle. I don't think I'd like that," I answered, refusing to call him my boyfriend in front of anyone.

"Hmmm," she said with a frown. "All right, I guess."

Kenny smiled at me and took my hand again, pulling me in for a hug and keeping me against him until it was time for us to return to our respective cabins. He made sure we were the last ones to leave the campfire, all of the other campers having disappeared indoors. We walked slowly to the steps of my cabin and he paused just in front of the door.

"I think it's pretty obvious that I like you," he told me, a sweet smile on his face. God, he was so cute!

I blushed bright red and looked at the ground, unable to say anything. My heart was beating so fast and the butterflies in my stomach were out of control.

"I'm going to be really sad to leave you tomorrow," Kenny continued and I looked up at him.

"You're going to make cry again."

He smiled and I could tell he was about to cry as well. "That's okay. You're still pretty when you cry."

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Could this really be happening? Did he really just say that? But before I could think about it further, he had pressed his lips to mine and I felt as if I was floating. I couldn't tell you what I was doing with my hands and I'm pretty sure my feet were standing shoulder width apart to brace myself in case I started to fall. But his lips were so soft and opening mine so gently. And then I felt it: the tongue ring. But he pulled away before I could figure out what to do with the thing, saying goodnight and trying to hide the tears that had started pouring from his eyes.

I stood there, on the porch of my cabin and watched him walk away. Hmmm. So that was my first kiss. Awesome. Kind of weird. But as I turned around, my confusion mounted as half a dozen faces smiled at me from the windows. The door was thrown open and I was rushed inside, a barrage of questions being thrown at me.

"What was it like?"

My head started spinning.

"Was it better than any other kiss?"

I need to lie down.

"What did the tongue ring feel like?"

Or just sit in the middle of the floor as everyone surrounds me and screams at me. That's better.

"Why are you bleeding?"

Um, excuse me? I looked up and saw Liz standing above me, her face slightly amused, slightly confused.

"I'm bleeding?"

"Your lip. It's bleeding."

My fingers went to my lip and I touched the damp spot I had just assumed to be Kenny's donated saliva. But no, it was blood.

"I've been using Dr. Pepper Lip Smackers all summer long! My lips can't be cracked!"

Suddenly the room went silent as we all realized what had happened.

"Oh gross. It's not my blood!"

"Ewww!"

"Oh my God!"

"His tongue ring totally bled in your mouth!"

And so the fascination with Kenny and his tongue ring ended. I lay in bed that night replaying my first kiss in my head. The blood had luckily diverted the girl's attention from me and they had left me alone for the rest of the evening, giving me a chance to let everything sink in. I had reached the conclusion that my first

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kiss had been perfection.½Kenny and I would be leaving each other the very next morning, his bus going to the airport, mine heading straight back to Portland.½We would write to each other, this had already been discussed, but that was where it would end.½We were young, but not naï½ve enough to think a long distance relationship at the age of 15 was a good idea.

I'm not going to lie, it was heartbreaking to watch him get on that bus the next day.½He kissed me again, before jumping aboard with his duffel bag, and even though the kiss itself wasn't as awkward, it was nothing compared to the kiss from the previous night.½I saw Kenny the next summer when Hannah and I drove to camp just for a visit.½He was a Jr. councilor at this point, and was dating one of the lifeguards.½I had my own gotten a job at a local pool and was busy flirting with my manager which only made me realize just how perfect my first kiss had been.½We had liked each other, Kenny and I, and we had parted as friends in our mutually acknowledged affection for each other.½I have absolutely no bad memories of him, no terrible break up or drama swirling around the memory of my first kiss.½Just a bizarre attraction to large noses and a secret fetish for tongue rings.

Chapter 2: The One Who Thought I Was Pretty

The One Who Thought I Was Pretty

I was riding high that Fall when school started again. I had finally kissed a boy. And he had a tongue ring. This, for whatever reason, inspired me to date an older man. I met Nick while playing for the water polo team. He was 18 years old and a senior. He smoked cigarettes. And he could play water polo like nobody's business. I was smitten.

Nick had this adorable face (with a legitimate five o'clock shadow, I might add) and a swimmer's physique. His abs could inspire romance novels. But I had gained weight over the summer and no longer looked all that cute in my Speedo during practice. Funny how I gained weight everywhere but my boobs. I'm still waiting for those to catch up with my ass. Nothing about me would appeal to him, or so I thought.

Nick and his group of friends would always walk to the pool ahead of me and my girls. We would keep a half block distance between us and the boys so we could giggle about them all we wanted. Carl, Nick's best friend, was tall and skinny. He looked like one of those emaciated Calvin Kline models. Drake was on drugs and constantly wore a beanie, even in the middle of summer. But by the time our first game had rolled around, the boys were tired of hearing us whispering behind them and our two groups finally integrated. It was amazing how many of my friends tried out for the team that year knowing I was now tight with some senior boys.

Nick and I would flirt during practice all the time. My favorite was when we played boys against girls because he would always swim close so he could guard me. Our legs would touch under water and my head would drown with lust. That, and he became really nervous if I put my arms around him while trying to reach for the ball. He would nearly always turn it over and I could make a clean break for the goal.

By the end of the homecoming dance that year, it was quite clear that Nick and I would be dating in the near future. I had invited my friend, Greg, who I was trying to convince myself to like. He was my age and kind of cute. Greg, however, could tell that I wasn't that into him and wasn't really into me either. Turns out I was using him to make Nick jealous, he was using me to get invited to our school's dance so he could hook up with some freshman chick in the bathroom. Classy.

Nick and I never actually danced at this dance. We flirted, shot each other seductive glances from across the room, and at one point, he even tried to hold my hand while my date was standing right next to me. We didn't say anything about our obvious flirtation, though I had my friends talk to his friends to see if he really was into me. Drake was too high to speak. Carl played dumb. I got nowhere.

But the next Monday at school is when I received my first note from Nick. It was a pretty basic note, folded in halves and had my name scribbled across the front. It read something along these lines:

What's up, Lydia?

You looked really pretty at the dance and I really wanted to ask you to dance but I guess I was too nervous. I can't wait to see you at practice today. I have something to ask you.

Nick

Isn't that just adorable? I was swooning! I showed all my friends and who confirmed that it was indeed the cutest thing in the world. Cuter than puppies, cuter than Leonardo DiCaprio and Jonathan Taylor Thomas combined.

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I didn't walk to the pool that afternoon. I floated. I was about to be asked out by a senior - a cute senior at that! Nick played it pretty cool while we were in the water. He avoided guarding me but kept smiling in my direction and I caught him staring on more than one occasion. I was thrilled when coach announced we had to tread water with a brick over our heads because I was looking for anything to distract myself from the giddiness I felt.

On the way into the locker rooms, Nick caught up with me and asked me to meet him outside. I agreed with a nod of my head and small affirmative squeal. I showered and borrowed all the makeup I could get my hands on and arrived outside in record time, looking as if I had just finished taking my school picture. Nick escorted me to a more private area (we went behind a dumpster) and took my hand.

"Lydia, I'm guessing you know what I'm going to ask you."

"Umâ !I may have an idea." Come on! I wanted to hear him say it!

"I just think you are really great and really pretty. I wanted to know if you wanted to go out sometime?"

And there it was. Not quite as romantic as I had pictured it, but amazing nonetheless. I smiled a huge smile and answered 'yes.' We exchanged phone numbers and he said he would call me later that night.

Later that night meant the second he got home. I had just started my math homework when the phone rang. I jumped out of my chair and sprinted into my parent's room (because they NEVER let me have my own phone), knocking my father and dog out of the way in the process.

"Hello?" I asked, completely out of breath.

"Lydia? It's Nick."

"Hi," I giggled and my father rolled his eyes. "How are you?"

"I'm good. I just got home."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Silence.

"So, did you have fun at homecoming?" He finally asked.

"It was okay."

"I should have asked you to dance."

"That's all right. You were there with your friends."

"True."

Silence. This wasn't going so well.

"So, when do you want to go out?"

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Now that was an interesting question. When did I want to go out? I didn't really think it was up to me. I mean, he initiated this date, he should choose. "Whenever."

"How about this weekend?"

"Sounds good."

"The movies?"

"Okay." This is when I realized I did not have the ability to talk to a boy on the phone. I still don't. My husband knows to only send texts unless he really needs to talk.

"We'll find one for Friday then."

"Great."

Nick paused and I waited. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye, Nick!" I hung up the phone without waiting to hear his reply.

The next day I received another note. Nick passed it to me in the hallway between classes with a small wink. This one was folded into a triangle. Interesting.

Lydia,

I can't wait for our date on Friday! I thought about you last night and how pretty you are and how great this is going to be.

Talk to you soon,

Nick

More adorableness!

Well, Friday rolled around as it always does and Nick and I went to the movies. My mom dropped me off and Nick took the bus. He was 18 and didn't have his driver's license. I don't know why this didn't bother me. Our first kiss must have happened that night, though I honestly don't know if that is the truth. But the next thing I remember, we were boyfriend and girlfriend and I had started a trend of seniors dating underclassmen. I swear, it spread like wildfire.

The more and more time Nick and I spent together, the prettier I became, the more he thought about me and the more notes I collected. He would come up with these completely bizarre ways of folding each of them and by winter break it was taking me at least five minutes just to figure out how to open the stupid things. But his notes were always sweet. He would compliment me on playing well at the water polo game, tell me I looked pretty that day, remind me that he was always thinking about me. But everything was always about me. How I was doing, how I was looking, how I was playing. Whenever the focus turned to Nick, he just became depressed and I finally think I know why.

1. He was 18 and without a driver's license.
2. He wasn't going to college.

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3. His friends were drug addicts.

4. He was dating a sophomore who had spent the majority of her freshman year looking like a little boy.

Not that these things really bothered me at the time. I mean, come on, I was 15 and there was no way I was planning a future with this guy. I was living day to day whereas he was thinking about what lay ahead. Things got really bad after I took my PSATs. I scored pretty well, especially in Math and Nick became insanely jealous. Turns out he didn't score well at all and couldn't accept the fact that I might actually be smarter than him. So, instead of pushing me away, he tried to pull me closer. I think he was afraid of losing me, afraid that I would wake up one day and realize that he was kind of a loser, no matter how nice he was.

As things went, he scared me off before that could happen. Water polo season had ended and swim team had begun. We were at our last practice before the holidays began and I found a note waiting for me at my locker. Sighing, I looked at it and realized it would take a rocket scientist to figure out how to get inside. I put it in my pocket and went outside to wait for my ride home.

"Did you read my note?" I heard Nick ask from behind me.

"Um, no. Not yet."

"Could you read it now?"

I looked at him and shook my head. "I can't figure out how to open it."

Nick laughed and held out his hand. I dug into my jeans and passed it to him. In a matter of seconds he had deconstructed his masterpiece and handed it back to me. "I'll wait inside."

"For what?" I asked, a little confused as to why he wouldn't be walking to catch his bus home.

"For your answer."

I blinked. What kind of question was he asking this time? I watched him walk back inside and sit down on a bench, his hands fumbling nervously in his lap. Then I returned my attention to the now creased and wrinkled paper.

Lydia,

I've been wanting to tell you this for a while. I've never said this to another girl before so I'm really nervous. But I want you to know that I love you. And I hope you love me too. Do you? Let me know.

Nick

I half expected there to be check boxes with a place for me to mark YES or NO. But there weren't. I would have to do this face to face. But what the hell was I supposed to say? I hadn't even thought about the word, much less the emotion. How did he know that he loved me? Could he feel it somewhere? I imagined I would feel love in my stomach or my side, kind of like a cramp but nicer.

I turned around and walked inside, sat down on the bench and stared at him. He stared back and I frowned.

"Why?"

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"Why what?" He asked.

"Why do you love me? Why did you tell me?"

"I love you because you're pretty and I think about you all the time."

Even at 15 that sounded like a bullshit answer. But Nick was sweet and I didn't want to break his heart. I still wanted to be his girlfriend, we just had to come to a quick understanding.

"Okay," I started. "I'm glad you told me, because it means a lot to me, really. But I'm not ready to say that yet. So I hope this doesn't make things awkward between us."

"Do you think you ever will be able to say it?" He gave me a hopeful look which kind of made me vomit in my mouth, just a little.

"Maybe. Someday."

"That's great! This is great. It will be great."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow." I was glad that was settled.

"Will you write me a note?"

"If I have time."

"I can teach you how to fold them, if you want."

"No thanks. Goodnight." I kissed him and left.

That night at home, I started to freak myself out. I thought about the weight of that word and what it meant if he really did feel that way about me. My friends weren't much help. I called a few and their reactions were all the same: "What the fuck?" "You're too young." "That's weird."

I didn't write Nick back that night.

New Year's was here before I knew it and Nick and I had plans to stay at Hannah's house. Carl was there as well and in Hannah's good graces. She had broken up with him a few times but they were back together for the time being. I think she just wanted to kiss someone at midnight.

The four of us got there early and watched a movie, Nick tried to feel me up but I wouldn't let him. He was getting desperate, I could tell. We then went upstairs and played Pictionary which led to our first and only fight. I couldn't draw a bowl of salad. Or rather, my bowl of salad was perfectly depicted on the page, Nick just couldn't interpret my drawing. Either way, we had to quit before we started yelling at each other.

Carl then announced he wanted to take a nap before midnight and put on some incredibly irritating techno music. Hannah, I think, forced herself to fall asleep before her ears were permanently damaged. I got up and went back downstairs. Nick followed and we ended up making out on the couch, what normally happened when we were alone because talking was just never as much fun.

Pretty soon my shirt was off and he was going for my pants. So not ready for that! I grabbed his hand and put it back on my boob, attempting to distract him with my mosquito bites.

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He looked up. "I thought we loved each other."

"Um, what?" He didn't just say that?

"I love you," he looked down at me with such intensity that I wanted to hide between the couch cushions.

"Yup," was the only response he got from me.

"Don't you love me too?"

I sighed. I did like him. Not right now, but most of the times. And I was clearly hurting him by not reciprocating his feelings. Maybe one day I could learn to love him. Maybe if I said it, I would start to feel it.

"Sure." That was close enough.

Nick's smile was brighter than any I had ever seen. He kissed me and I could tell that I had made him the happiest man in the world. So why did I feel like such shit? I'll tell you why: because I had just lied. I knew I didn't love him. I knew it was easier to tell him I did so he wouldn't look upset the entire night. It was wrong and I was scared.

I also knew I had to break up with him after that. I waited until we were back at school and then I wrote him a note. Really nice of me, I know. But I felt I could say everything I needed to say in a note and he wouldn't be there to look at me with his sad eyes and make me feel bad. I apologized for letting him believe something that wasn't real. I told him that I still cared for him and wanted to be friends. I promised that I would always care about him.

But he didn't take it well. He blamed my friends, he blamed my parents, he blamed everyone but Santa Clause for our breakup. None of it could be my fault or his because we were meant to be together. I was pretty and he thought about me all the time, why shouldn't this work? I received folded note after folded note, most with some sort of sketch in the corner just to prove that he was the better artist and if he had been drawing a bowl of salad, we wouldn't have fought. Those bowls of salad, always ruining perfectly good relationships.

But swim season ended and I didn't see him as much as I used to. We eventually stopped talking all together and I was happy to learn that he did decide to go to college. My friend Betsy, who had started dating Carl after Hannah dumped him for the third time, kept me up to date on everything Nick was doing whether I wanted the information or not. But the final straw fell when she announced Nick had lost his virginity to some girl at college. She was to report back to Carl, interpreting my facial expression for jealousy. I promise you, I showed none.

Nick and I saw each other only once after he graduated that year. He was lifeguarding at a pool my senior year. I was captain of the swim team and he was covered in tattoos.

"Those are pretty cool," I commented, wanting our incredibly awkward encounter to be over.

"Their tribal. Isn't your family Native American?"

I blinked my blue eyes and pushed a pale hand through my red hair. "My grandmother is 1/64th Cherokee."

"That's right," he said with a wide grin. "I knew I remembered that about you."

What the fuck?

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"Isn't your family Russian?" I asked, slightly confused by the tattoos now that he had brought it up.

"Yeah, well, technically my parents were born there."

Never mind. I didn't want to know. "Okay, well I have to go give the freshman a pep talk. It was great to see you!"

"You too. You look really pretty."

Damn it. Do guys ever learn?

Chapter 3: The One Who Took My V Card

The One Who Took My V Card.
Mom, please stop reading.

No, I'm serious. You can stop reading right now.

In retrospect, even I find it hard to believe that I lost my virginity at age 16 considering I didn't get my first kiss until I was 15. 18 months after the tongue ring incident and I had fallen in love and started sleeping with my boyfriend. Okay, so maybe I hadn't really fallen in love, but I was having sex.

I met Michael through a mutual friend. Remember Greg, the guy who I went to homecoming with sophomore year? Well, it turns out he was good for something. He was Michael's best friend and he was the one who introduced us. We were all hanging out at the Rose Gardens on Saturday evening in January (no, there weren't any roses that time of year, just picnic benches which we used illegally after hours) and I remember thinking how cute Michael was. He had a big nose and wasn't too tall. His baggy clothes didn't hide the fact that he was unbelievably skinny and he wore his hat sideways. He was hot.

I found the courage to approach him while he was smoking a clove cigarette. I had never smoked one of those before and wasn't so much interested in the tobacco as I was in the guy taking puffs. I sat down next to him and asked for a drag.

"Have you ever smoked one of these before?" He asked, not looking me in the eye.

"No," I said with confidence. I wanted to give that innocent yet curious attitude.

Michael nodded his head and handed me the cigarette. I took one drag and thought my throat was going to disintegrate into my chest. Even though tears were coming to my eyes, I kept from coughing and exhaled.

"Wow. That's nice."

Michael smiled and I returned the cigarette.

"So, is this where most of you Lincoln kids hang out on the weekends?" he asked and I blushed. Michael was from the other side of town and all I knew about his school was that they had a shitty swim team and cute boys.

I feel as though I should explain something about my high school. Lincoln High is one of two public high schools on the West side of the river. We grew up in the West Hills which I guess you could say are like the Beverly Hills of Portland—kind of. We, myself not included, drove new Jeeps and Mercedes and never, EVER partied in our parent's houses. We were smart enough not to mess with the expensive shit. Plus, we traveled in large packs. What would start out as a small, controlled gathering, would quickly turn into a raging kegger if the wrong person, or the right person, was called. Seeing as we loved our parent's credit cards too much to be grounded, we stuck to public parks and middle school jungle gyms.

"This isn't so bad, is it?"

Michael smiled but didn't look at me. He took a drag from his cigarette. "It's actually pretty cool. You're here."

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He still wouldn't look at me. It was the sexiest thing ever. He held the cigarette up to my lips and I inhaled another toxin-filled breath. The rest, as they say, was history.

Michael and I kissed that very night and he had made me his girlfriend by the following day. Since we didn't go to the same school, we would talk on the phone nearly every night. Well, he would talk, I would laugh at his jokes and answer his questions. And, as if one boyfriend without a driver's license wasn't enough, I had somehow managed to score myself a second. But that didn't matter as much now because I had turned 16 over the summer and had full access to my parent's minivan until 1:00 am every Friday and Saturday night.

We didn't have much of it, but I distinctly remember how Michael and I spent the majority of our time together. We would go to parties on the weekends where he would drink and I would stay sober (gotta respect the minivan, people) and if we were lucky enough to be able to crash at a friend's place, I would down two wine-coolers and we would make out for about an hour. But then the weekdays would come and we wouldn't see each other.

Somewhere during our phone conversations and drunken make-out sessions, I decided I was in love with him. That decision led to the next obvious one which was to have sex. Now, don't get me wrong, I didn't take this choice lightly. I knew it was going to be a big deal, I knew I couldn't change my mind once the deed had been done. But I also knew that I was in love with Michael, pretty much obsessed, and we had great physical and emotional chemistry together.

I didn't tell my friends what I was planning on doing. I didn't tell anyone - even Michael. I didn't want my friends to influence this decision and I already knew Michael's thoughts on the matter. He was, after all, a 16 year old boy. So I kept it to myself and as the weekend approached, I grew more and more confident with the choice I had made.

That Saturday was St. Patrick's day. I wore green cotton panties. Sexy, I know. I arrived at Michael's house that evening and his parents were already gone. This was just perfect. We went upstairs to his bedroom and he played me a new CD he had just purchased. I couldn't help but notice all of the candles that he had burning. Could he have been planning for the same thing I was??? This was so meant to be!

"What do you want to do tonight?" Michael asked me, suddenly very shy.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"Greg knows of a party we could go to."

"Okay. We could do that." Not really what I had in mind and clearly not what he was thinking either.

"Or we could just hang out here. Go downstairs and watch a movie."

"That sounds good."

Then there was this really obvious silence where we both just kind of stared at each other, neither one of us moving.

"We could have sex," I suggested, not seeing the point in delaying the inevitable.

"I'd love that," Michael said quickly and very enthusiastically. "I mean, only if you would too."

"I think I would like it as well."

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And so it was decided. I'm not going to go into details because I'm pretty sure my mom is still reading this, but I'll just give you an overview of the whole ordeal. It was awkward. Super awkward. I'm pretty sure we went through about 3 condoms before things actually started to work for us. Michael was a virgin as well and apparently neither one of us had listened in health class when they had explained how all of this was supposed to work. But he was sweet and told me that he loved me. He asked if I was hurting, asked if I needed anything. He told me I was beautiful and that he couldn't imagine his first time being with anyone else.

All in all, it was a pretty good experience, though not like the sex you read about in books - especially mine. It was way past my curfew when I realized what time it was. I really didn't want to leave Michael and he was begging me to stay, but I knew that if I ever wanted to see him again, I would have to get home and make up a lame excuse for my tardiness. So I jumped in the minivan and took off back to the west side.

"Mom?" Yes, I called my mom on my way home, three minutes after having sex with my boyfriend. Don't ask me why I thought this was a good idea.

"Lydia? Where are you?"

"I'm lost."

"Lost where?" I love how my mom is always so worried about me. Being an only child is awesome.

"On the east side," I said, making sure to sound terrified. "Don't worry. I've already locked my doors."

"Good. Now, tell me the cross streets."

I looked up and read her the streets and she gave me directions. Looking back, I know she could read straight through my bullshit. But at the time, I was pretty convinced I had gotten away with murder. The murder of my virginity.

I got home that night, well after 2:00 am, went into my parent's room and hugged my mom. She didn't ask any questions, just told me that she loved me and wished me a goodnight. I fell asleep, sore like I have never been before, and woke up thinking about Michael.

We had sex only twice more after that. The second time was better and the third time was traumatic for both of us. Michael was over at my house and we were hooking up in my room which shares a wall with the garage. He was about to finish when we heard the door go up and I literally pushed him onto the floor.

"You said your parents weren't going to be home!" He screamed at me.

"They're here early!" I cried back and threw my pants on.

Michael was pushed into my closet, his boxers and jeans thrown under my bed.

"Hi, Mom!" I was overly excited to see her.

"Hey, honey."

"I thought you were going to be at the office all day."

She shook her head and gave her reasoning, all of which I was too terrified to listen to. My boyfriend was naked and in my closet. Things couldn't get much worse.

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"Okay, well I'll be in my room if you need me." I smiled and quickly shut the door, diving to the floor to retrieve his pants and underwear.

"Put these on!" I whispered, opening the closet and dropping them at his feet. He was sitting in my laundry bin, his skinny legs dangling over the side.

"What the fuck are we going to do?"

"I'll distract her and you leave through the garage."

"And go where? You're supposed to drive me home."

"Take the bus!" Nick could do it. Why couldn't Michael?

"Fine!" He cursed and stood up, giving me the signal to go distract my mother.

I opened the door to find her right outside my room. "Were you talking to someone?"

I nearly confessed everything right then and there. "Um, myself."

She gave me a funny look and I panicked.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" I asked, taking her arm and pulling her downstairs. She didn't object so I figured she either didn't want to know or didn't realize what had been happening in my room.

I called Michael later that night. "That was a close one!" I said when he picked up.

"I know. Did you find it?"

"Find what?" Was I supposed to be looking for something?

"The condom."

"The what?"

"The condom." He annunciated every syllable.

"No. I thought you had it."

"I did. I mean, it was still on when I left."

"Huh?" Why the hell would he leave it on? Wasn't that uncomfortable?

"I didn't know what to do with it so I just left it on. But then when I got home, it was gone."

"Did you feel it fall off?"

"No."

I didn't know anything about the male penis and so that answer seemed pretty legit.

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Unfortunately, things went downhill from that point on. Prom season was upon us and I of course asked Michael to accompany me. But he refused and I was baffled. I wish I knew what I had done to make him change his mind about us so suddenly. He claimed that he just wasn't in to school dances. I claimed to not care, saying that if he loved me, he would go. He was silent and I started to cry, knowing that it was over. I told him that if he didn't say something to me that very second, then we were over. He was silent and I left him.

I cried for days and days over Michael. I was inconsolable. And I didn't have a date to the prom. Luckily Betsy was able to find someone for me at the last minute and I ended up having a somewhat decent time - but you'll read more about that next chapter. By the time summer rolled around and I returned to my lifeguarding job (and my hot manager), I was almost completely over him.

Years later, Michael showed up at a party I was throwing at my parent's house. Yes, by college we had deemed ourselves responsible underage drinkers and ventured inside. He asked to speak with me and I took him out to the back deck where he apologized, actually apologized for how he had acted so many years before. He told me that he had loved me, he hadn't been lying about anything he had said, and that he had been too worried about what his friends thought of him to understand just how amazing our relationship was. He hoped I didn't hate him and that we could be friends. I bought most of it but took it all with a grain of salt.

It's quite easy to romanticize your first love. Some people say that you will never fully get over that person. I'll agree, Michael and I are connected in that small way, neither of us will ever be able to forget the other. But perhaps I never really loved him. Maybe I was mistaking my curiosity for the real thing. I don't know what Michael is doing now but I wish him well. I know that if we ever met on the street, no hard feelings would be held and no feelings of love, other than adoration for those distant memories, would surface into our conscience.

Chapter 4: The One Who Wouldn't Go Away

The One Who Wouldn't Go Away

In the seventh grade I went to a dance at our local athletic club. Most of my class was there as well as students from other rich schools around the area. This was the first time I met Todd. For a seventh grader, he was cute. He had dark hair and was dressed better than any other 13 year old I had ever seen. We danced and exchanged numbers, compared stories about our drama filled, adolescent lives and then parted for the evening.

Todd lived in Lake-Oswego, the part of town where no houses sold for under 10 million. Boy, had I found a winner. Todd and I chatted on the phone for a couple weeks and talked about going to the movies but nothing ever came of that and I was starting to get bored. Then one afternoon, things took a slight turn.

"Hello?" I answered the phone before my dad could pick it up.

"Hey, Lydia? This is Andy, Todd's friend."

"Oh." Why was he calling? "How's it going?"

"Fine, fine. How are you?"

"Fine."

"So, Todd wanted me to ask you a couple questions."

"All right." What was this, some sort of interview?

"He wants to know how far you'd go with him?"

"Excuse me? Go where with him?" My poor innocent mind only thought in distance, not in terms of sexual relationships.

"You know? Would you ever go to third base with him?"

Oh, the bases. Now I got it. But my definition of third base and his definition of third base probably didn't match up. None of my friends could give me a clear answer on which base meant what deed.

"No," I decided. "And that's a gross question." Who the hell has their friend call and ask something like that? Who did this guy think he was?

"But it's one he really wants to know."

"Then he can ask me himself."

There was a long pause where I am assuming Andy was relaying this information to Todd.

"He says he wants me to ask."

"Well I say I'm done with this phone call." I promptly hung up the phone and thought I would never have to hear from Todd again.

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I was wrong.

I didn't see Todd at any more of the athletic club dances that year. Thank God. I knew my friends and I wouldn't be able to resist making fun of him so it was probably in his best interest to stay away. Eighth grade passed and so did most of ninth when we found ourselves at the very last dance we would be eligible to attend at the club.

My friends and I dressed up and I did the most I could with what little hair I had and our parents dropped us off. It was bittersweet, to say the least. We had so many fond memories of these dances but we could now graduate to high school dances which were decidedly better. Sometime during the middle of the dance, a tall, dark and handsome kid tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to dance. I blushed and set my fruit punch on the table and walked behind him to the dance floor.

Something was oddly familiar about this guy but I couldn't put my finger on it. I'd probably just seen him around the club before.

"What's your name?" He asked after a few awkward seconds of slow dancing.

"Lydia. What's yours?"

"Todd."

Bingo.

"Todd?" This was going to be fun. "Do you live in Lake Oswego?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Just a guess," I answered quickly.

"Where do you go to school?"

"Lincoln. Hey, have you ever been to these dances before?"

"I used to go when I was younger but this is the first one I've been to in a while. Why? Have we danced together before?" He smirked at me and I gave him a brilliant smile.

"We have, as a matter of fact."

"Really? I think I would rememberâ!"

"Would you remember having your friend call some girl you had been talking to and asking her if she would go to third base with you?"

"Oh," his face fell like an anvil. "I would remember that."

I blinked at him, the smile still on my face, and waited for him to do something.

"I should go," he finally announced and dropped his arms from my waist.

"That's a good idea."

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He ran off into the crowd and I ran back to my friends laughing hysterically.

Skip ahead another two years and I had just dumped my boyfriend because he refused to go to prom with me. Sad. Now I was without a prom date, without a boyfriend, and without my virginity. Things couldn't get any worse. Luckily I had Betsy who had been in a relationship with a guy, Hamilton, for the better part of our junior year. And Hamilton, being a life saver, had a friend who was dying to go to our prom. Would wonders never cease?

Betsy told me I would really like this guy. She had hung out with him before and he was totally hot. He was Italian and lived in Lake Oswego. His name was Todd. I didn't think twice about it, my heart still broken into a million pieces and my mind still on Michael, until I showed up at Betsy's house the evening of the dance. My dress was hideous, an unflattering salmon pink with beaded straps and a bust that I couldn't fill. The skirt was lined with a ridiculous amount of netting so it stuck out like a princess gown. It was itchier than anything I had ever worn.

Betsy grabbed my hand and dragged me into the dining room where Hamilton and Todd were sitting. I recognized him instantly but he stood up and gave me a hug, introducing himself with a smile. Wow. He had turned into a stud! I mean, seriously, where did all those muscles come from? And that smileâ I could get lost in it. Maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad after all. And, this really wasn't a blind date anymore since I already knew the guy. Of course, I wasn't about to bring up that fact around him, seeing as he hadn't figured it out yet, but I was hoping his personality had changed as much as his looks.

The night was nearly perfect. The prom was being held outside and in the middle of downtown Portland. Everyone looked amazing and the venue was beautifully decorated with white lights and candles. My date was such a gentleman, never leaving my side and always asking before he led me to the dance floor. But I had to tell Betsy about my past with Todd. I mean, wasn't it some kind of sign that he kept popping back into my life?

I explained the whole situation to her on a trip to the ladies room and her eyes went wide with mischief.

"Maybe the third time is the charm!" She said, way too enthusiastically.

"He does seem to have changed," I admitted.

"Of course he has. Seventh grade was such a long time ago."

"I know. But do you think he remembers me?"

"He would have told Hamilton by now. I don't think he remembers a thing."

That was a relief. "I won't bring it up then."

"Good idea. Just wait and see where things go. You never know, you could be laughing about it months from now."

A huge smile spread over my face and we walked back out to our boys.

The four of us went back to Todd's house after the dance. Betsy and I changed into sundresses and the boys into jeans and t-shirts and we settled down to watch a movie. Pretty soon Betsy and Hamilton had been kicked out of the living room because their make-out session was getting too out of hand and there were just some things that the best friends should never have to be witness to. Todd and I were now alone on the couch

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watching the movie when I felt his hand creep around my shoulder. That wasn't so bad, I thought, and so I leaned into him.

One thing led to another and pretty soon his tongue was halfway down my throat. I hadn't kissed a guy since Michael and for some reason that felt like an eternity, although I suppose it was only a few weeks. Todd was a good kisser and I was having a great time making out with him until I felt him pull away. Frowning, I opened my eyes and glared.

"What's wrong?" I asked, a little upset. Was I not a good kisser? Did he really want to stop?

"Nothing. I just need to readjust," he said with a smile and my mouth fell open as I watched him unbutton his pants.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable."

"You should button your pants."

"Why?"

Why? Why??? I mean, I know we were at his house, but he had company over and his idea of 'comfortable' was definitely not suitable for entertaining guests.

"Whatever," I said and sat back against the couch cushions.

Todd relaxed back as well and we watched the movie in silence for a few more minutes. But pretty soon I felt his hand creeping around my shoulder again. He pulled me back to him and I glanced down to make sure everything that was supposed to be covered was still covered. But it wasn't. Little Todd was now on display and sticking through his boxers.

"Okay, seriously, put that thing away!"

"What? Why?" he asked as I felt his hand start to push my head down. "If I put it away then how are you supposed toâ!"

"I am not going to third base with you!" I nearly screamed and stood up from the couch.

"Third base?" He gave me a curious look.

"I'm not going to do it," I reiterated and grabbed my phone to call my mom. I was so ready to get out of there.

"Whatever," he said, shoving Little Todd back into his pants.

We sat in an uneasy silence until my mom had arrived and, being the polite girl I am, I thanked Todd for accompanying me to the dance. He was somewhat of a gentleman and walked me to the front door but he was smart enough not to kiss me again. I explained the entire story to Betsy the next day who had been really excited about the possibility of me and Todd hooking up. We were able to laugh at the entire situation by Monday at school because apparently the third time is not always a charm.

Chapter 5: The One Who Only Lasted One Night

The One Who Only Lasted One Night

Writing this chapter was really difficult for me. I hate to think about this and I hate to talk about it. Luckily, it happened so long ago that no one really remembers it so I'm not subject to random conversations involving the embarrassment that was this night. I have lied about and vehemently denied that this event ever took place, but it did and so without further ado, here are the details of my first and only (technically) one night stand.

After my prom date with Todd, I was frustrated with guys. Were there just no good ones out there? Did I have to give up on men at the young age of 16? That sounded like such a depressing idea. But that's when I met Peter. He didn't go to our school but was always hanging around my group of friends so I saw him pretty much everywhere. I thought he was cute from the moment I laid eyes on him but he didn't appear to have noticed me so I didn't really think twice about him. This all changed on the last day of school.

Summer had finally arrived and I was going to be turning 17. Part of the summer break was going to be spent in France where I would be living with a family, joining in their daily activities and sightseeing. I couldn't wait; I had been excited for this all year. But a month was a long time to be away from all my friends and I was starting to regret the decision I had made. Four weeks doesn't seem like a long time now, but back then I felt as if I would be missing out on everything if I left Portland even for a weekend.

The day school let out, we heard about a party going on at someone's house. It wasn't really their house yet - it was still under construction. But whatever, that really didn't matter as long as we could get a keg into the backyard. We made the drive out there and all slid down the muddy hill to the fire that had been built and we started drinking. I was driving so I stuck to water but soon noticed a rather intoxicated Peter making his way over to me. We chatted for a little bit and bonded over the fact that we shared the same birthday. He walked me to the fire so we could keep warm and put his arm around me, telling me how cute I looked in my hooded sweatshirt. Well isn't that just the sweetest thing you've ever heard?

I didn't want to put too much thought into Peter's advances because he was, after all, intoxicated and since he had never shown any interest before, I could only assume that it was the alcohol talking and not him. But I was wrong, kind of. Peter asked for my number and called me the next day. We didn't go out but we spoke on the phone and agreed to meet up later in the week before I left for France.

Later in the week turned out to be a Thursday and I was scheduled to leave on Saturday. Peter picked me and my friend up from her house and drove us to a party. It was small and contained so we were able to hang out inside. Since I wasn't driving I had a little to drink and my inhibitions and better judgment started to fade along with my reasoning skills. I missed having a boyfriend, or so I thought. Mostly I just missed Michael and how great he had been at the beginning of our relationship. I'm not an angry drunk so instead of remembering all the bad things about my ex, I would always start remembering only the good. Since I was lonely, the only option for me was to find myself another boyfriend and this is what I set out to do.

Peter seemed like an obvious choice because he at least liked me enough to invite me out with his friends. Hey, it was a good place to start. It didn't really occur to me that he would mind my four week absence while abroad, but then again, nothing really occurred to me that night like it should have. At some point during the evening, Peter took me by the hand and led me upstairs. It must have been a spare bedroom or something because there was a mattress on the floor, a dollhouse in the corner and nothing else. We started making out and ended up on the mattress when he pulled away.

"I have a condom in my pocket," he said.

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Well that's great, and I have a pink phone in my purse. What are you going to do about it? But I didn't say any of that. I stared at him as he looked at me expectantly. Is that the kind of girl that Peter wanted, the kind of girl who would sleep with him? It seemed like a reasonable thing to want coming from a nearly 17 year old dude. But it's not what I wanted. Certainly not what I would have normally done. But I was a little bit desperate, maybe very desperate, for his affection and thought that if I slept with him he would like me enough to make me his girlfriend.

I hate that this was my mentality back then. It's so embarrassing and so degrading. I swear to you, I'm not going to lecture anyone in any other chapter except for this one, but please just listen to me and I promise I won't take up much of your time. Girls, 98 times out of 100, a guy is not going to be your boyfriend just because you sleep with him. There's that one percent who actually turn out to be decent and the other one percent who you really shouldn't be dating to begin with. You don't need to sleep with a guy just to get his attention because, I swear to you, you are getting the wrong attention. This changes as you get older but only slightly. Always, no matter how old you are, if you want a guy to respect you, don't go throwing yourself at him because you obviously don't respect yourself. And guys, don't be assholes. Okay, I'm done.

Back to my stupidity. Peter could obviously see that I was making some sort of decision in my head so he kept talking.

"We don't have to do it if you don't want to. I mean, I know you're leaving for France soon so I just thought..." and he let my imagination fill in the rest. See, right then is when I should have pushed him off and ran away. This was his way of telling me that he didn't want anything more than sex.

In his mind, he was saying: you're leaving for France so I just thought we could do it without any strings attached.

In my mind, he said: you're leaving for France so I just thought we could make love so I will have something to remember you by during all those lonely nights while you are away and I'm missing you.

So my response was, "No, I want to."

I was rewarded with a huge smile from Peter and luckily he took his time undressing me. Actually, maybe if he had been in a hurry, I would have realized just how big of a mistake this was. But he was gentle with me and made me feel comfortable but as soon as he was naked and lying on top of me the worst possible thing happened. I heard the door being thrown open and in rushed a group of guys all cat-calling and hollering obscenities. I saw a camera flash about half a dozen times and then they disappeared. I couldn't breathe and was suddenly very, VERY sober.

I looked up at Peter who was glaring at the door. "Um...what was that? Please tell me that didn't just happen."

"I, um..." Peter started. "I think I need to go talk to someone."

And with that, he got up, put his jeans on and stormed out of the room. So there I was, lying naked on some old mattress, wondering what the hell I was going to do. There was a window I considered climbing out of but no other way out of the house unless I wanted to walk through that group of guys who had just seen me naked. Well, kind of naked. Peter was pretty much covering most of me, thank God!

But before I could make up my mind, Peter had come back and announced they wouldn't be bothering us. "Do you still want to do this? I'll understand if you don't. That was horrible what they just did."

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"It was pretty bad," I agreed. But I was still naked and seriously thought that if I didn't have sex with Peter right then and there I would never have another chance and he would never be my boyfriend. "But we can still do it."

He looked relieved and we had sex on the old mattress. It wasn't good but I think both of us were too flustered to care. Peter held on to me pretty tight for the rest of the night. He knew I was mortified by what had happened and the looks he was giving the other guys told them not to mention a thing or he would take them out back and kick their ass. He dropped me off that night and apologized for everything, telling me that he never wanted it to be like that but promising me he had a good time regardless. I told him I would call him before I left and watched as he drove off.

I kept my promise and called him the next day. I was hoping he would ask me out, maybe invite me over to watch a movie. But he was busy that night, going to another party with his friends. He told me to have a good time abroad and maybe he would see me later in the summer. I hung up and started crying. Luckily, Paris was a great way to get over a guy. I was so distracted that I didn't have time to think about Peter until I realized I had missed my period. I was a mess and couldn't bring myself to ask my host family to drive me to a drug store so I could get a pregnancy test. I didn't even know how to say that in French.

The flight home was nerve racking. Now that there was a possibility I was carrying Peter's kid, I wanted him more than ever. I couldn't help but wonder if he would be waiting for me at the airport. I knew it was a long shot, but once I started day dreaming about it, I couldn't push it from my head. To my surprise, I did have a welcoming party waiting for me at the gate. My four best friends were there to meet me with flowers and balloons and I started crying the second I saw them. I was so happy to be home.

Can I just tell you how great my friends are? Ali took me to Planned Parenthood and I took a pregnancy test. Negative. I guess the excitement and stress of my temporary home and recent one night stand just shocked my body into missing a period. Who cares about the reason? I was just glad not to be pregnant!

Betsy informed me that it was Hamilton's camera that had taken the pictures that night. Thank God it was a disposable and not a digital. She had it in her possession and we were going to destroy the evidence. One night, not long after I got home, Betsy, Hannah and I all drove down to a one hour photo booth. We developed the pictures, laughed our asses off at the faces Peter and I were making, and took them to a park where we proceeded to burn them. Looking back, flushing the photos down the toilet would have been a better idea because our little fire got slightly out of control and we all ended up melting the rubber off our shoes because we had to stomp it out before the entire field went up in flames.

After Peter, I vowed that I would not sleep with another guy until I was in a committed relationship. The stress of this one night stand had definitely not been worth the bad sex. Needless to say, I was looking forward to avoiding all the parties Peter would attend, but as luck would have it, Peter ended up transferring to Lincoln for most of senior year. It was awkward to see him around and even more awkward when we were both hanging out with the same people. I didn't talk to him for a while, just because it was easier that way, and he respected that. But eventually I got over it and we started talking again. The last time I saw him was on our 21st birthday where we ran into each other at a bar. We bought each other drinks and hugged like old friends, all the embarrassment of our one night stand far behind us, but my lesson has still been learned.

Chapter 6: The One Who Said I Was Bad In Bed

The One Who Said I Was Bad in Bed

My freshman year of college was an absolute blast. I moved down to northern California to attend Santa Clara University. The campus was beautiful with palm trees everywhere, Spanish architecture, tropical flowers, and hundreds upon hundreds of gorgeous, tan, California boys. I was in heaven. I dated a few guys at the beginning of the year. I call it dating, others may classify it as drunken hook-ups, but that's really not the point. The point is, I had stayed celibate my entire senior year of high school and I was getting impatient. I wanted a boyfriend so I could have sex again and wasn't about to have a random one night stand that I knew I couldn't emotionally deal with.

A few weeks after returning from Winter break, one of the girls on my floor asked if I wanted to go to the beach with her and her friends. I thought it was kind of strange because Sarah and I had never hung out before but I agreed to go. Who was I to pass up a free trip to the beach? So that weekend, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt because it was still February, Sarah and I waited outside our dorm and were eventually picked up by her two friends.

Andy, I recognized. We had met at orientation and had become friends because we were both from Oregon. Jake, I had seen around but had never spoken to. We had mutual friends but had never spent any time together. The entire day was slightly awkward. It turns out Sarah wasn't that close to either of these boys and I'm still not quite sure how the entire arrangement was ever made. Nevertheless, we traveled the 25 miles to the beach and spent the day wondering around the pier and talking about the parties we would go to that weekend. Being drunk just sounded like a better option for all of us at that point.

Sometime during our day, Sarah and I decided it would be a good idea for the two of us to make jell-o shots when we returned to the dorms. And this is exactly what we did. Now, I don't know how many of you have ever made jell-o shots before, but it's not an easy or particularly clean process - even when you have access to a full kitchen. We had to improvise seeing as we still lived in the dorms. Water was boiled in an electric tea kettle. The jell-o was dissolved in plastic cereal bowls. The shots were stored in ice trays in our mini-fridges. It was pretty MacGyver of us, if you ask me.

Andy and Jake returned that evening and the four of us got things started by downing at least thirty jell-o shots. Somewhere during that evening, Jake confessed that he had wanted Sarah to ask me to the beach because he liked me. I was flattered and we ended up making out in his room for the majority of the night. Jake wasn't like the other guys I had dated. He was short, really short, with a small nose and way too much muscle. I think he was trying to make up for his unfortunate height. But he also proved to be incredibly sweet. He would send me flowers even though he only lived three floors above me. He would introduce me to his friends as 'his beautiful girlfriend'. I was pretty much head over heels for the guy.

About a month into our relationship, we decided that it was time we started sleeping together. Jake was a virgin. I, as we now all know, was not. But that didn't bother him and he, for some reason, expected me to be some sort of expert at the whole thing. Sorry, Jake. I had only had sex four times before you came along. But whatever.

So we waited until my roommate had left town and he took me out to a really nice dinner, bought me flowers, told me how beautiful I was, and then quickly marched us back to my dorm room. Within in a matter of minutes, both of us were naked and lying on the bed, Jake had his condom in place, and was asking me if I was ready.

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"I'm ready," I announced. "Are you?"

"I think so," he said.

"Okay." I smiled at him because I could tell he was nervous. Then, for whatever reason, I felt the need to give him some advice. "Don't worry if it doesn't last that long. It's your first time and we can have more fun during the second round." Did that sound rude?

"I'm not 16," he told me. "I think I'll be able to last long enough."

"Okay," I said with another smile. "Go for it, then."

And he did. Thirty seconds later, and he was done.

"Shit," was all he said.

"It's okay, really. We can do it again."

"Shit. I can't believe that just happened. I'm really sorry."

"It's really okay," I promised him. "It's kind of flattering, in a way."

"Why?"

Well, fuck. I didn't know why. I was just trying to make him feel better. "It means I did a good job?" It sounded more like a question.

"I guess."

I frowned at that. Jake was clearly distraught and refusing to look at me. That was just inconsiderate. But after a few more minutes of ego massage, Jake was ready to try again and this time he lasted a whopping seven minutes. It was a miracle.

After a few weeks of being sexually active, Jake suddenly developed a conscience.

"Why haven't you had an orgasm yet?" He asked me one night.

Now there's a question for you. I honestly had no idea what an orgasm was supposed to feel like. Maybe I had experienced one and I just didn't know it. No. I felt like I would have known. I wanted to give Jake an honest answer. Bad idea.

"I've never had an orgasm before," I confessed. "I'm not sure how to go about having one."

Jake looked at me like I was crazy. "Never?"

"No. Never."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I've only been with one other guy before you (complete lie) and we didn't get to practice that much before we broke up." That bastard.

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"But you've had other boyfriends, haven't you?"

"Of course I have." One, maybe two.

"And?"

"And what?" His questions were getting on my last nerve.

"And why didn't any of them give you one? Why haven't you given yourself an orgasm?"

"To answer your first question, I don't know. We never really got to that point. To answer your second question, I don't do that."

"All girls do that."

"No we don't." Who did this guy think he was? He had just lost his virginity fifteen days ago and now he had become the expert.

"Well maybe you should start then. It might help me."

"Help you do what?"

Jake looked at me and smiled. "If you knew what you wanted, then you could tell me so I could help you enjoy this as much as I do."

Well, that was kind of sweet. But not convincing enough. "I'm sure we can figure it out together."

Jake smiled again. "That means lots of practice."

I laughed. "Okay. I'm cool with that."

Apparently Jake was practicing for a marathon. He would drag me up to his room every chance we had and we would experiment with ways to get me off, none of which involved different positions or anything other than just regular sex (penis in vagina). It was mostly him coming at me from different angles while I lay on my back. It was tiring and after about a month, it was boring. But Jake had become a man possessed. He was determined that I would orgasm with him and only him and started becoming very frustrated.

My inability to orgasm became that huge pink elephant in our relationship, the one that was so obviously there but neither one of us would mention. Our friends just thought we had an unbelievable sex life considering our doors were always locked and the bed could nearly always be heard squeaking from down the hall. We both knew different. Eventually that elephant took a huge shit in the middle of my dorm room and I knew Jake and I would be breaking up very shortly after that.

My friend Ali had come to stay with me. She was still in high school so I wanted to show her a really good time. I took her to a party, got her drunk, and found a cute guy for her. That's when Jake decided it was time to go back to my dorm room. Ali promised me she was in good hands and so I made the hike back home with Jake tugging me along eagerly. But I was wasted and in no mood to mess around. My best friend was in town and this was going to be over quickly - none of this stupid orgasm business.

"We're going to try something new," I announced as soon as Jake and I had climbed into my top bunk. (P.S. sex on the top bunk, never a good idea.)

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"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we are going to try another position."

Jake gave me a blank stare. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. You're the guy. You think of something."

The blank stare didn't leave his face. "I don't know how to do anything else."

"Well neither do I but what we've been doing clearly isn't working anymore." I'm so pleasant to be around when I'm drunk.

"Why don't you get on top, then. I'm tired of doing all the work."

Ouch. But probably very true as my enthusiasm had waned sometime the week before. So we started going at it and my plan was a success. Five minutes into it and Jake was spent. I promptly called Ali and told her it would be okay for her to come back to the room. Jake announced he would be spending the night and the three of us passed out. Sometime in the middle of the night, Jake woke up and tried to get me to sleep with him again. I refused and he took it personal. Way too personal. He climbed out of my bunk bed, slammed the door and didn't speak to me until the next afternoon.

We tried to work things out but it was very obvious that we were forcing something that shouldn't be happening. I started looking for excuses to break up with him and he started giving up on the sex. Luckily, Spring break came around.

"So, Lydia, I was thinking, how would you feel about taking a break while we're gone next week?"

"Like, taking a break from our relationship?"

"Um. Yeah."

I could see right through this one. "So you can go to Cancun and hook up with other girls but then still have someone to back to? I don't think so."

He didn't try to deny it. "I just don't think we're having fun anymore."

"It's finals week. No one is having fun."

"A break would be good for us."

"I'm not interested in taking a break, Jake. I'm interested in breaking up."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Did I do something?"

"No. You did nothing," I sighed. Literally, nothing. "But it's pretty obvious neither of us are into this anymore."

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"I guess."

"Have a good Spring break." And that was the end of that.

Spring break came and went and Jake never made any contact. We would see each other on campus and it was always a little awkward because I had seen him naked and he had seen me naked. It wasn't until another guy started showing interest in me, that I heard all the rumors that had been flying around.

Fun-Boy, as we called him (because he drove a forest green Mustang convertible), was after me because I reminded him of Kirsten Dunst and he was in to TPWG, thin pasty white girls. I was a little scared. Well, Fun-Boy lived on Jake's floor and I don't know if the two ever actually talked about me or if the rumors were just that wide spread, but one day I was studying in my room when Fun-Boy walked in and sat down on my bed.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

He pulled out his can of snuff and started to dip. So gross. "You used to date Jake, didn't you?"

"For a few months last quarter, yeah."

"Did you guys have a bad break-up or something?"

"It could have gone better, I suppose. But I don't have any hard feelings..."

"Then you should probably know what he is saying about you."

First of all, let me just get this out there, if you have something to say to me, just say it. I don't like playing games. I don't like asking questions. I don't like guessing.

"I'm not sure I want to know."

But Fun-Boy told me anyway. "He's telling people you are bad in bed."

I laughed out loud. Of all the things he could say, why would he choose that one? Who would actually care? But then I froze. I cared. That was bullshit! He was the one who was bad in bed, not me!

"Are you okay?" Fun-Boy asked, spitting into a plastic bottle.

"No. You're grossing me out. If you're going to do that, get it out of my room." Honestly, at this point I was embarrassed. I, for whatever reason, hated the idea of people thinking I was bad in bed. It was actually quite insulting, but probably would have been even more so if I had actually put an effort into the sex I had with Jake. Maybe he was mistaking my lack of enthusiasm for lack of skill. But who was I kidding? I had no skill to speak of and certainly didn't gain any when I was dating him.

"Are you angry at him?" Fun-Boy asked.

"Yes. He's the one..." But I didn't want to start the blame game so I just rolled my eyes. "He's an asshole."

"He is," Fun-Boy smiled at me. "But I'm not."

"No. You're not. It's too bad I don't date guys who chew snuff."

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With that Fun-Boy left and came back after he had brushed his teeth. Like that made a difference.

So I'm not normally one for confrontation. I hate it, in fact. Except when I'm intoxicated which is exactly what I became that weekend. I was planning on seeing Jake out at a party because that is where I usually ran into everybody I knew on the weekends. But that didn't happen so I did the next best thing which was to drunk-dial him.

"Jake. This is Lydia. Your ex."

"Hey," he sounded nervous. "What's up?"

"I just wanted to know why you were saying those things about me."

Pause. "What things."

"You know what things and I refuse to say them out loud."

"No. I don't."

"Yes you do. And you know what? I think you're a bad person." I really knew how to insult someone, didn't I?

"Lydia, I..."

"No," I interrupted him. "I'm talking. You can't say I'm bad in bed because you have nothing to compare me to. Virgin. So stop talking shit because I haven't said one bad word about you. And you never complained when we were together so you can't start complaining now. Grow up, Jake."

There was a long pause and I was worried he had hung up on me. "Are you done?" He finally asked.

"I think so."

"Goodbye, Lydia." Then he hung up on me.

I felt that I had made my point so I locked my door to keep Fun-Boy out and I went to sleep. The next morning I woke up and couldn't believe what I had done. Oh well. Too late to take it back now. Soon school was done for the year and I didn't have to see Fun-Boy or Jake for an entire three months.

Sometime during our sophomore year, Jake gave me a drunken apology one night at a party. He admitted to spreading the rumors and said that he was sorry, he didn't know what inspired him to start being so negative. I, like the nice person I am, accepted his apology and declined his offer to recant his statement to every person he told. It just seemed a little past the point of mattering.

Jake graduated early from Santa Clara and moved to New York or DC or somewhere out east. We are Facebook friends (whatever that means these days) but haven't spoken to each other in probably six or seven years. I wish I could say that I learned a lesson from my relationship with Jake but I honestly can't think of what it would be. Don't date short guys with small noses. That's about all I got. Sorry.

Chapter 7: The One With Friends Who Hated Me

The One With Friends Who Hated Me

I dated Sam for the first time my junior year of high school. He asked me to homecoming and I said yes. The dance was great and Sam was such a gentleman. He was the star pitcher for the baseball team and had these amazing abs. I remember getting drunk after the dance and just sticking my hands under his shirt so I could feel his stomach. He loved the attention and I loved the fact that he was letting me do it. Anyway, despite my incredibly stupid behavior post-homecoming, Sam still asked me to be his girlfriend the next Monday at school. I said yes.

Part of Sam's appeal was the fact that he was in a gang. Not a real one, just a fake one, but this still made him a bad boy. And, as I know most of you can attest, girls always fall for the bad boys even when we know we shouldn't. It's part of who we are as women and just something we learn to live with. Like menstrual cycles. Anyway, Sam's gang had some ridiculous name and was comprised of him and four of his friends. They all came from the North East Portland and that was pretty much the basis of their union. It was purely for fun and we all thought it was hilarious.

Anyway, skip forward one week and I had changed my mind about this new relationship. I didn't like Sam as much as I thought I did. His abs could only take me so far. But we were friends before we dated and I didn't see why we couldn't be friends after we broke up. We had only been together for seven days so not much harm had been done, right? Wrong. Our mutual friends, all of whom were guys, took the breakup worse than Sam and practically declared war on me. My name was scribbled on desks right next to such colorful words as Bitch, Skank, and Ho, or any combination of those three. It hurt, but I got over it. I had hoped they would as well.

The second time I dated Sam, we had just finished our freshman years of college. I was at Santa Clara, he was attending Oregon State, and we were both back in Portland for the summer. He came to a party at my house. Remember the one I told you about where Michael tried to make amends for what happened? Yeah, Sam was there too along with all his friends who used to hate me. Sam and I flirted for most of the night and while his six pack abs had been replaced by a beer belly, he was still kinda cute. His large nose made up for his gut.

After my very intimate talk with Michael, Sam pretty much assumed that I would be getting back together with my ex and ignored me for the rest of the evening. Of course, I didn't understand why until he admitted as much later in the summer. I explained what had happened and Sam looked as if I had just given him the best present in the world. We started dating about one month before school started again and things were great.

When it came time for me to drive back down to California, leaving Sam wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be. Turns out I function well when in a long distance relationship, rather strange considering how much I don't like talking on the phone, but it worked for us. Luckily, I didn't have to wait too long before seeing him again. Sam surprised me one day by making the twelve hour drive from Portland down to Santa Clara and showing up at my front door. He, of course, brought his friends. Now, I think almost all the guys had gotten over what happened back in high school. All but one and his name was Hero. Hero had a major chip on his shoulder, not necessarily against me, but against the world in general, and took every opportunity he could to be mean to people. I was no exception and the fact that I had broken Sam's heart once before gave him a license to treat me like the horrible person I was.

So there we were, me and my three roommates, my boyfriend and his three friends, all squeezed into this tiny two bedroom apartment, sweating our asses off because we didn't have air conditioning. My friend Eric had asked me about my new boyfriend and I had immediately told him that he was in a gang. All of the 'members'

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had gotten tattoos upon turning 18 which read: NEP (standing for North East Portland). The only problem was that the P looked like a D so to anyone who didn't know better, they now all had NED tattooed on their chest or arm, what was commonly assumed to be a boy's name. Eric and I found this to be endless entertainment.

What I didn't find to be entertaining, however, was when Eric threw open the door of our apartment at 3:00 am and started challenging the gang to a fight. He thought it was all in good humor, Hero was about to pull a knife. Sam and I managed to calm everyone down but Hero was done with California at this point and announced they were leaving. So, an entire nine hours after they had arrived, they were on their way back to Portland.

When I had seen the boys arrive at my door, I had planned on their stay being somewhat eventful, seeing as Hero and I always managed to start drama whenever we were together. What I didn't plan on, however, was falling in love. I was completely amazed at how Sam was able to keep his cool during the whole Eric/Hero fiasco. Don't ask me why this made me fall in love with him, but I was just really impressed. I decided not to tell him about my feelings because I was pretty sure I would scare him off. It had been less than two months since we had started dating and he didn't seem like the kind of guy who fell in love easily. So I kept it to myself and told him to drive safely, I would see him in a couple weeks.

As our relationship progressed, so did my feelings. I couldn't believe that I had broken up with him the first time as I was now completely convinced that we would be together forever. Sam was shy and kind, yet moody and harsh when necessary (I still had my bad boy). The best of both worlds, so to speak.

Over Winter break, I decided to tell him that I was in love with him. We had been dating for five months and I just felt that it was time. Even if he didn't reciprocate the feelings, at least he would know how I felt. New Year's Eve was my night to do it so sometime during the party I dragged him downstairs.

"What's going on?" He asked, kissing me in that wonderful way that only he could do.

"I want to tell you something," I started. "I want to tell you that I love you and I know that you may not be ready for this but I thought you should know."

Sam smiled and kissed me again. And then again and again. I got the feeling he was stalling.

"That's a lot to take in right now, baby girl," he said eventually. My heart fell into my stomach. "But thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome," I sighed. "This doesn't make things awkward, does it?"

"Of course not," he promised and kissed me again.

But it did make things awkward. So awkward. Our phone conversations became fewer and fewer once I returned to school. He was spending more and more time with Hero and would always make me talk to him whenever I called. I couldn't believe how quickly things were spiraling out of control for us. Finally, after three days of unreturned phone calls, I texted him and told him to call me immediately, or else. Can I just say that I hate giving ultimatums, but it had to be done. I couldn't break up with someone's answering machine (because I knew that's what would happen we finally spoke). It was going to be hard enough to do it over the phone.

Finally he called.

"What's up, baby girl?"

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"Why haven't you called?"

"I've been busy," he said and I could tell his mouth was full of food.

"Well I've been worried."

"Worried about what?"

"Worried that I'm more into this relationship than you are. I can't be with someone who ignores me all the time. We need to talk...on the phone. That's the only way a long distance relationship works."

"So what are you saying?"

I took a deep breath, hoping that he would respond to my next statement with the words I wanted to hear. "You need to either stop ignoring me and start treating me like your girlfriend or you need to break up with me so I can move on."

There was a long pause and I knew what was coming. "I think we should break up."

And my heart was broken...again.

"I guess that's the best idea. I'm not dealing with the distance very well."

"Neither am I."

But I didn't think the distance was what bothered him. He wasn't telling me everything but I was too upset to speak to him any longer so I said goodbye and hung up.

A couple days passed before I spoke to him again. He called to check on me, just to see how I was doing. I wasn't doing so well, but I didn't let him know that. I was drinking...a lot, and kissing almost every boy who showed me any attention at all in the hopes of getting over Sam. But Sam wasn't that easy to get over and apparently neither was I. We ended up speaking more and having better conversations after we broke up than while we were dating. We would talk for hours and hours (guess who was finally, if only temporarily, cured of her phone issues?) and I knew that we would be getting back together after one very interesting conversation.

"Do you miss me?" Sam asked.

"Of course I miss you."

"We're going to hang out during spring break, right?"

"Obviously."

"I didn't think I would miss you this much," he admitted. "But I guess we're even now."

"Even?"

"Well, you broke up with me once and I broke up with you once."

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I was shocked and very ready to hang up the phone. Is that what this had been about? "If you wanted to get back at me, you could have broken up with me before I got so attached, Sam. What the hell..."

But he didn't let me finish. "It wasn't about that. I don't know why I said it."

I don't know why he said it either. It confused the hell out of me so I didn't respond.

"I just love..." he started to say but then stopped, causing my heart to pound out of control. "I just love that I get to see you in a couple of weeks. That's all."

"I'm excited about that as well," I sighed and quickly ended the conversation.

So going home that Spring break, I had it in my head that Sam and I would get back together. We missed each other and still cared for one another so one thing should have led to another. But I had Hero to contend with and things weren't going to just fall into place.

Sam decided that we were all going to go camping. Well, Sam and I would be "camping", everyone else would be staying in a yurt.

"Why don't I get to stay in the yurt?" I asked, completely opposed to the idea of camping at a place you didn't have to hike five miles to find. Anything else just isn't camping - it's sleeping in a tent next to your car.

"Because I'll be staying in the tent and I want you stay in there with me," was the answer I received.

"Oh." I thought about this and it seemed like getting Sam alone would be a great time to hook up with him thus rekindling our relationship. "All right, then."

I drove Sam down to southern Oregon in my minivan and we met up with the rest of the group. Hero was there along with his girlfriend and two other guys from high school. The weekend started out well, although I don't think Hero can help the fact that he was an absolute asshole. Unfortunately, I was sick, as in dehydrated, coughing, head about to explode sick and almost lost it when he started making comments about how bad I looked. I knew I shouldn't have gone in the first place, but the idea of getting back together with Sam was stronger than the fatigue I was feeling.

That first and only night was the beginning of the end for me and Sam. I turned in early because I was feeling so shitty and then had to listen to Hero bitch about my being along for nearly an hour. Sam did little if nothing to stop it. He joined me in the tent a couple of hours later and tried to have sex with me. Like that was going to happen. But apparently my refusal to open my legs for him was a bit of a wake-up call and when Hero opened his mouth the next morning to sling another insult, Sam was quick to shut him up. Hero didn't take it well. At all. In fact, he grabbed a bottle of booze, his car and his two friends, and fled the campsite leaving me, Sam and Hero's girlfriend to entertain ourselves. Luckily there was a town about half an hour down the road so the girlfriend and I indulged in some retail therapy.

Four hours later and the three of us were back around the yurt, Sam and the girlfriend trying to start the fire while I was lying in the tent feeling about as miserable as I could get. That's when Hero came back and took the drama to a whole new level.

"Get up!" I could feel someone was kicking the tent.

"No," I moaned.

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"Get up! I need your help."

"Go away, Hero!"

"You need to get up and see what I've done."

I rolled my eyes and sat up, unzipping the tent and glaring at him. "I'm not getting up. Go away."

"But I need your help."

"With what?" And where the fuck was Sam to keep this kid away from me?

"I killed a turkey and I need your help cooking it."

The fact that he had killed a turkey didn't seem as bizarre as the fact that he assumed I knew how to cook it.

"How the fuck and I supposed to know how to cook a turkey?"

"You're a girl. Girls know how to do shit like that."

"Where's your girlfriend?"

Hero shrugged and unzipped the tent the rest of the way. I reluctantly got out of my sleeping bag and followed him to the campfire. A couple of feet away was his car and he opened the trunk to reveal two very dead, very wild turkeys.

"Where did you get those?"

"I shot them in the woods."

I blinked. "Where did you get a gun?"

Hero smiled. "Some guy sold it to me at the gun store."

"The gun store?"

"The gun store," he confirmed.

I blinked again. I knew we were miles from any sizeable town, but this was getting a little too redneck for me.

"Didn't they have to do a background check?" We all knew Hero wouldn't pass one of those.

"Not for a shotgun," he smiled proudly at me and grabbed one of the turkeys by the neck, swinging it out of the trunk and trying to hand it to me.

"I'm not touching that!" I screamed at him and he frowned.

"Why not? You'll have to touch it if you are going to cook it."

"I'm not cooking that thing! And who in their right mind would sell you a shotgun? I can tell from a mile away you've been drinking."

"Like it matters," was his response. "Now cook this turkey!"

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I hated that he was ordering me around but I had never cooked a turkey before and knew that if I returned to the tent, I would never have any peace. So I called the one person I know who has killed, feathered, and cooked a turkey. My grandmother.

"Grandma? It's Lydia."

"Hi, Diddy!" Diddy is my nickname and probably always will be because when I was younger I couldn't pronounce my own name. Lydia came out as Diddy. Don't ask why because I don't know.

"Grandma, I need your help. I have a recently dead turkey lying in front of me and I don't know how to cook it."

My grandmother became very serious and Sam sat next to me, offering a little support. "Where did you get this turkey?"

"Umâ !" I had to think of a lie because she wouldn't like the truth, but I couldn't. Maybe I could distract her with a question. "Will the turkey's previous location matter when we start to cook it?"

"No."

I paused because I knew she was waiting for an answer. But I'm her only granddaughter and she's pretty protective of me so I didn't want to upset her by explaining that my ex-boyfriend's drunk-ass friend bought a shotgun and killed a wild turkey.

"We got it from a turkey farm."

"A turkey farm?"

"Yeah, they have those in southern Oregon." Sam gave me an incredulous look and I could only shrug my shoulders.

"Did they take off the feathers at this turkey farm?" My grandma asked, sounding as if she believed me.

"No."

"You should demand your money back then."

"No, Grandma. They don't offer refunds."

"Well you'll have to feather it then. Is the head still on?"

I stared at the bird who was staring back at me. Creepy. "Yes."

"I'd cut that off first."

Oh, gross. "And after that? How do I get the feathers off?"

"You have to boil some water and then soak the bird in it for a few minutes. The feathers will loosen up and come right off. But make sure to get all the down off as well."

"Right. Remove all the feathers. And then?"

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"And then you remove all the insides, baste it and put it in the oven."

An oven. I looked at Sam who gave me an apologetic smile. I turned and glared at Hero. "We don't have an oven. Can we roast it?"

"If you have to."

"All right. Thanks, Grandma."

I quickly hung up and thought about throwing my phone at Hero. What had this asshole gotten me into? I instructed the boys to drive to town and get a big pot, large enough for water and the bird. Our turkey cooking was underway.

I flat out refused to touch the bird. It had been alive less than an hour ago and I felt incredibly strange about the entire thing. So the boys boiled the water and managed to get all of the feathers off the bird and only dropped the thing on the ground twice. Yes, they still wanted to cook it. And yes, Hero was still drinking. He had an entire bottle of Jack Daniels which he would only share with the turkey. He would pour the whiskey into the bird through the neck, claiming that he was marinating it.

"Stop pouring Jack into that damn bird!" I eventually screamed at him. The thing was almost overflowing at this point.

"And what the fuck would you know about it?" Hero asked. "Let me cook the bird how I want to cook the bird."

"You would still be pulling out the feathers if it weren't for me," I reminded him.

Hero glared and picked a piece of meat from the outside, stuck it in his mouth and frowned. "This doesn't even taste like Jack Daniels yet. Guess I should add more."

He poured another shot into the bird and I rolled my eyes. "You're going to make yourself sick. You shouldn't be eating it before it's cooked all the way."

I guess that pushed him over the edge. "Shut the fuck up! Just go sit in your fucking tent and leave me the fuck alone."

This guy really, really didn't like me. And I'm a very likeable person. Honest.

"Whatever," I said, glancing at Sam and then walking to the tent to collect my things. "I'm leaving."

"You're going home?" He looked concerned as he followed me.

"I'm sick and I'm tired and I really can't deal with this anymore."

"Are you sure, because I can't"

"No, Sam. You can't. You won't say anything to him and you're letting him be such a dick when you know I don't deserve it."

"You're provoking him."

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"I'm not!" But I wasn't in the mood to argue. "Look, we can talk about it later. Are you coming back with me or are you staying?"

He thought about it and I knew this choice would be the choice. He would finally have to choose between me and Hero.

"I'm staying."

And that was that. I saw Sam a few more times that spring break but I knew that hope of reconciliation was long gone. I couldn't compete and no longer wanted to. A girl just shouldn't have to compete with her boyfriend's friends.

Chapter 8: The One Who Needed Me

The One Who Needed Me

I'm honestly a little hesitant to write this chapter. Abe was the first guy who loved me completely and unconditionally. It's hard to find humor in this relationship because I still feel as if I did a horrible thing by breaking his heart. I'll just have to walk that fine line and do my best to convey the right details to you all.

The summer after my sophomore year in college, Hannah and I decided that we were going back to camp. You know, the camp where I had my first kiss? We would be staff now, in charge of campers and all that. Our friend Ali, who had worked there the year before, promised us that we would have a great time and there would be plenty of guys for us to hook up with. See where our priorities were?

We spent one week training, getting to know the rest of the staff, and searching for prospective boyfriends. I didn't necessarily like my options, but it was camp and I knew that I had to lower my standards for the summer. Soon it was my birthday and I turned 20 years old. Everybody drove down to the beach, we had the older guys get us jugs of wine, and we built a bonfire. I was halfway through my jug of Carlo Rossi, because cooking wine is as good as the real stuff if you're just trying to get drunk, when I caught Ali staring at me.

"Can I help you?" I love Ali to death. She's one of my best friends and knows my sense of humor.

"I'm going to hook you up with Abe," she announced.

"Who?"

"Abe."

"Why?" I knew who he was and had heard stories. He was older, I think 23 at the time, and had hooked up with a 17 year old last summer. Not like a one night stand, like actually dated her. It seemed a little odd but that didn't really matter because camp was a different world and we all did things we normally wouldn't. Plus, Abe had a huge nose. I'm talking Adrien Brody size. It was glorious.

"Because I think you two would be great together." And with that she stood up and wandered down the beach to find him.

A few minutes later and Abe was by my side, helping me polish of my gallon of Chablis. I wish I could remember more of that evening, but I don't. I know we did kiss but nothing more and I remember being impressed by how good of a kisser he was.

The next week was when the first round of campers showed up. I was assigned to the second grader's cabin and had 14 eight year old girls running around completely out of control. Seriously, working with children is the best birth control ever. But, and I promise to continue with my story after I say this, if you ever have kids and make the decision to put them on some type of ADD medication and then send them to camp, please, PLEASE leave them on their medication. Don't give them some prescription holiday. It's really not cool, believe me.

Anyway, that first week I believe I lost almost 7 pounds because during meal times I was either running after children or hiding in my cabin. Luckily we had our one and only field trip for that session and we took the kids to the Tillamook Cheese factory, perhaps my favorite processing plant in the entire world. They have this really disgusting treat called squeaky cheese. It's the curds that are scraped from the sides of the vat after the cheese has been processed. It's delicious and squeaks when you chew it. So I'm sitting at my table with a

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dozen screaming kids around me, eating my squeaky cheese in peace, when Abe comes up and sits down next to me.

"How's it going?"

"Fine," I blushed. We hadn't kissed since my birthday but I desperately wanted to again.

"Your girls are adorable."

"Aren't they?" Try living with them for a night.

"So, what are you doing for the session break?" He was referring to the three days we would have off before the next round of campers arrived.

"I don't know. I guess going back to Portland. Ali is having a party so I'll be going to that."

"Really?"

"Of course," I smiled at him and he smiled back.

"I guess I'll see you there," he said, standing up and winking at me. I smiled back and watched him walk away.

"He likes you," Tori said, a cute little blonde girl who was the only kid in the entire cabin who would listen to me.

"Yeah?" I asked. "How can you tell?" I couldn't believe I was having this conversation with an eight year old.

But Tori sighed and climbed up on my lap. "Lydia, sometimes a girl just knows these things."

I laughed. "I guess. Is it obvious that I like him back?"

"Totally."

Well, that was great.

A few days later and all of the staff was at Ali's house, drinking and having a good time. As if we didn't see enough of each other at camp, we still felt the need to spend every second together on our days off. We were a close knit group and I loved it. Abe approached me sometime during the evening, one thing led to another and I woke up the next day in bed with him. It was slightly shocking, my behavior that is, because I had promised myself I wasn't going to sleep with a guy until I had known him and dated him for a while. But this was camp and one week camp time was like three months normal time. Well, that's how we all justified our promiscuous behavior anyway.

Thing progressed quickly from there. We spent every day together and would sneak off at night to some secluded spot on the beach, make out and then sneak back into camp. It was always a challenge to find a hidden spot that wasn't already occupied by some other couple. Abe was endless fun that summer. He was goofy yet so comfortable with himself. He cared so much for me and everyone could see our affection no matter how much we tried to hide it from the campers. He was one of those people who was always upbeat, always nice to everyone, a genuinely good guy.

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By the end of the summer, I knew it was going to be incredibly difficult to leave him when school started again. I was so completely in love with this guy and he felt the exact same way about me. Abe was different from the other guys I had dated. He was older, more mature, and probably thinking about his future, thus more committed to making our relationship work. He was always making me laugh, always complimenting me, and always finding ways to completely sweep me off my feet. I was unbelievably happy.

School started and I went back to Santa Clara. The distance was difficult because we had essentially lived together over the summer. I was used to seeing him 24 hours a day, not speaking to him on the phone at random intervals between classes. We tried to make the best of it and got along pretty well until tragedy struck. Craig, Abe's best friend died suddenly from a rare strand meningitis. He was only 21 years old. Abe called me in the middle of the night and told me what had happened. I was in shock, complete shock. No one close to me had ever died before and the fact that I was so far away only made things worse.

I flew home that weekend and didn't quite know what to expect. Everyone from camp was there, but it wasn't like the summer. We were all somber and completely depressed. It was heartbreaking to see Craig's girlfriend. Abe was nearly inconsolable and I had no way of comforting him and felt desperate in my attempts. You see, Abe had incredibly bad luck. It seemed to follow him everywhere. During camp, he gave himself a concussion while dodging a wad of toilet paper that was being thrown at him by one of his campers. He hit his head on the wall so hard he bled. He had broken his nose at least three times (which probably accounted for its size and shape) and had fractured more bones than I could even count. Growing up in the Midwest, one of his best friends had been in a terrible car accident and was killed. So at this point, Abe was pretty much convinced that disaster followed him wherever he went. He tried to break up with me, saying that he just knew something bad would come along - something bad always happened to the people he loved most - but I wouldn't let him. He wasn't thinking straight and quite obviously needed a constant variable in his life. Why shouldn't that be his girlfriend?

But I had to go back to school and Abe wouldn't go with me. We talked about moving in together down in California but he wanted to stay in Portland where his friends were. That made sense, but I quickly found out that his friends weren't giving him the help he needed. He moved into an apartment with a guy, Frank, who didn't have a job or any sort of income from what we could tell. Frank would smoke in the apartment, leave dishes everywhere and always reeked of weed. Abe was quick to jump on that bandwagon and by the time I came home for winter break, was smoking half a pack a day and spending almost \$50 a week on pot. That's only what he told me about. He also had this dog that he had brought home from the pound and who reminded me of my second grade campers. The dog wouldn't obey for anything and was constantly peeing and shitting in the house. Abe could rarely be bothered to clean it up and it didn't seem to bother Frank in the least. Their apartment was foul and I couldn't spend any time there.

New Year's came around and Ali was throwing another party. I was so disgusted by Abe and his new lifestyle at this point that I almost didn't want to go. But I still felt that he needed me. I still felt that I could make a difference. He was trying to quit smoking and I had helped him clean his apartment. The dog had a new kennel. But he was reluctant to do all these things. He was reluctant to do anything but have sex with me and smoke weed.

We were standing on the back porch, Abe was smoking a cigarette (the one he promised he would be his last), and I was talking to some friends. From out of nowhere, a snow ball came whizzing by my head, missing me by mere inches.

"What the hell?" I looked around for the culprit and my eyes landed on a very guilty looking kid I recognized from high school.

Let the games begin.

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Now, I'm not the type of person to retaliate with an obvious attack. Throwing a snowball in Grant's direction would have been the most logical thing to do but that wasn't my strategy. Pretending to be morally offended and hurt by his blatant disregard for my wellbeing was a much better approach. I watched as Grant went inside, all the while telling Abe that I didn't care about the snowball, just let it go. Pretty soon I, along with my friend Elise, had cornered Grant and was giving him a piece of my mind.

"I know you threw that snowball, Grant," I taunted him. He blushed.

"Why would you do that?" Elise asked, looking as angry as she could.

"I don't know," he said, looking very apologetic.

"But you threw it at my face," I said, waving my hands in front of and around my head. "My face."

"I'm sorry?" He was clearly confused and my plan was working.

"It's my face," I said again. "I'm pretty. Why would you do that to my face?"

Elise cracked a smile at this point and we all started laughing. Only Abe didn't think it was so funny. He grabbed my hand after Grant and I had laughed it out and dragged me downstairs.

"Why would you do that?" He asked.

"Do what?"

"Do you know how stupid you just made me look?"

"Abe, what are you talking about?" I was so confused.

"You should have let me defend you."

"Defend me? Against what? Grant? Believe me, I don't need defending against him. We were just having a little fun."

"Still," he pressed. "It made me look pathetic."

I sighed. "No, it didn't. No one cares."

"Whatever." He lit another cigarette.

That night I refused to sleep over. We fought about his smoking. We fought about his dog. We fought about his roommate. We fought about almost everything. I practically ran out of his apartment, slipping down the stairs in the snow and spraining my ankle. What a way to spend the rest of winter break.

I returned to California a few days later. Abe and I had talked things through but I won't lie, I was excited for the time away from him. I knew things weren't working out but I refused to accept it. Abe needed me. He was so lost. But I no longer felt like he wanted my help. I tried to break up with him a few weeks into the quarter. He cried and cried and I nearly lost it. Two days later and I had called to say I was sorry and I took him back.

Things didn't get any better. They only got worse. I flew to Seattle for a weekend and asked Abe if he would make the short drive up to see me. He said he couldn't. He had no one to look after his dog. Yet he would call

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me at all hours of the day and night just to talk. He was such a mess and there was nothing I could do. He would pretend to be fine but I knew different.

By the time Valentine's day rolled around, I knew something had to give. I flew home to spend the weekend with him and to see my girlfriends. I wanted to talk things through with Abe, give him some choices and maybe open his eyes a little bit. But once I got home, he bailed on me, saying that his friends were in town and he wanted to see them. Hi. I was in town. He should want to see me. So I did what any girl would do. I gathered my three best friends, made tank tops which read "Drunk and Single, Valentines Day, 2004" and we went out dancing. At 10:00 that evening I received a phone call from my boyfriend desperately wanting to see me, apologizing all over the place, crying for the mistake he made. But it was too late. I told him I would see him the next day and left it at that.

The next day was horrible. It took me over three hours to break up with him. Abe had so many questions and didn't understand my reasoning. I explained everything to the best of my ability but there are only so many ways you can say it. He didn't have his life together and I wasn't capable of helping him anymore. By that afternoon, I was driving him home and we were both crying. We sat in his car for almost 30 minutes just holding each other because we both knew it was going to be so hard to let the other go. He asked if he could kiss me one last time and I let him, knowing it would make driving away just that much worse but no longer caring about how much pain I was causing both of us.

Abe and I would call each other randomly throughout the years just to catch up. He eventually figured out his life and is now working with children full time. We no longer talk, but I hear through mutual friends that he is doing well. It's hard giving up on someone who you are supposed to love. But what are you supposed to do when they have given up on themselves? Maybe I wasn't strong enough to take care of him. Maybe I was just selfish. I'd like to think that the end of our relationship was a wakeup call for him but I'm probably wrong. I really do wish the best for Abe. He was a great boyfriend and an amazing person.

Chapter 9: The One Who I Scared Away

The One Who I Scared Away

After Abe, I really wasn't in the mood for a boyfriend. There were a few guys at school who I would mess around with, but nothing serious. It was now my last year of college and my friend Meghan and I were living together. We each had our own rooms which was a nice change. I had almost forgotten how nice it was not to have a roommate. This also gave us the opportunity to bring home more men, something which wasn't always a good idea but we were young and stupid.

I met Luke early in the year and we flirted like crazy. This isn't saying much. I flirt with everyone. But Luke was different. He didn't take my flirting seriously and knew that I was only having fun. We would dance together at the bars, he would take me home when I had too much to drink and I would do the same for him. He would show up at my apartment just to surprise me with take-out or pizza. We would send unbelievably flirty text messages back and forth all day long. And if I didn't feel like going out, I knew I could call Luke and he would be perfectly happy to sit on my couch and watch a Disney movie with me. We were friends but I knew that he wanted more. Under all our playful flirting, I could always sense he was secretly flattered by my attention. He always came up with some excuse to touch me, always put up with all of my bullshit no matter how annoying I was. But I didn't like him as anything more than a friend.

Luke watched me go through guy after guy and eventually started to pull away from me. I don't know if he was tired of watching me with other men or if he had just started to lose interest. But the second I realized what was happening, I panicked. I couldn't lose him. He had been there for me the entire year, like a surrogate boyfriend. He was someone I could depend on, a backup plan, if you will. Okay, I know that sounds horrible. But that is honestly how I thought of him. I knew that if I was lonely I could call him and he would come over and massage my ego for a bit. It's a horrible thing to say and a worse thing to feel. But that's just how it was.

I knew that if I wanted to keep Luke around, I was going to have to stop leading him on and try to make something out of whatever our relationship had become. So I invited him over one night, snuggled up next to him on the couch, and let him kiss me. He wasn't a bad kisser and I was actually surprised at how attracted to him I now found myself. He wasn't the best looking guy...by far. He was a little chubby and wore really tight designer shirts and expensive jeans. But he had a kind face and seemed to really care about me.

"What does this mean?" He asked me after I had let him kiss me.

"What does what mean?"

"What are we doing?"

"Like, right now?" Okay, way too many questions were being asked.

"I'm kissing you and I've wanted this for a long time, so I'm just wondering what it means to you," Luke clarified and I frowned.

I couldn't explain my real reasoning to him because he would most likely find it offensive. "It means we're trying something and we'll see where it goes." I didn't know where this would lead. We could decide that we were better off as friends or we could start dating, like legitimately dating.

Luke blinked and stared at me for a minute, clearly not liking my answer. "All right."

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I don't think I ever went out on an actual date with Luke. It seemed pointless considering we already knew each other pretty well. But maybe that's where we went wrong. Maybe if we had actually dated, we would have both come to the same conclusion about where we wanted this relationship to go. I, for one, was starting to really like the guy but this was probably because I knew that if I didn't, I would lose him. He was confused by my new affection toward him and probably didn't know what to do now that he wasn't chasing after me all the time.

Luke and I never put a title to whatever it was we had going on. Things didn't last long enough and I was coming on way too strong. I thought that Luke would want me to act like he had been acting all year long. I would call just to 'chat', show up at his house just to hang out, go home with him after parties and spend the night. (Thank God I never had sex with him.)

But Luke apparently didn't like being pursued. He started flirting with other girls in front of me, started ignoring my calls and texts - all of which made me go insane. Why was this happening? He was supposed to like me. I was the pretty one, I was the one who had guys throwing themselves at me and was ignoring them just to spare Luke's feelings. What was wrong with this situation? I had never been so blatantly rejected before and it hurt. It was embarrassing more than anything.

I felt myself becoming absolutely desperate to win him back and I couldn't figure out why. I wasn't in control and I didn't like it. I didn't like it one bit because there was no reason Luke shouldn't like me. I was really that naive. I remember the night it all fell apart. I had been drinking with Meghan and returned home to find that Luke hadn't bothered calling me back. And that's when I lost it, like completely lost it. I started crying, mostly because I didn't know what else to do. I had invested so much time into this guy, trying to get him to like me again, and I was failing. I hated failing. I hated that I couldn't force him to like me.

So I drunk dialed him.

"Luke? Where are you?"

I could hear him sigh. "I'm driving home."

"What are you doing for the rest of the night?"

"Nothing."

"Want to hang out?" I can't believe how desperate I had become.

"I'm with some friends."

That was a 'no' and all it took for me to start crying again.

"Are you crying?" He asked, not really sounding like he cared.

"No."

"Okay, there's really no point in lying to me."

I tried to stop but at this point I couldn't.

"Look," he started, "I don't know what you want me to do or why you called..."

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"I just want you to say that everything will be okay...that we'll be good again."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, that we'll be like we used to be. Back when you liked me."

"I'll come get you," he said quickly and then hung up the phone.

I waited until I heard his car outside and then I skipped down the stairs, eager to see him. But he wouldn't look at me and we drove to his house in silence. He took me up to his room and sat me on his bed.

"Lydia, I don't know what to tell you."

"I don't understand what I did wrong."

"You didn't do anything wrong," he sounded so annoyed with me.

"You used to like me, you know?"

"I know I did."

"So what does this mean?" I remembered the time he had asked me that question and I had lied to him about my answer.

"I don't know. Let's just go to bed."

And that was his way of telling me he didn't want me anymore. I spent the night, hoping he would wake up and change his mind, but that morning he made it incredibly obvious that he didn't care. I woke him up and told him I was going home. He handed me a sweatshirt and told me not to freeze to death. He didn't even walk me to the door. My walk of shame that morning was particularly rough for me. I knew I had fucked things up with Luke because I had been selfish. I should have let things naturally fall into place instead of trying to force something that I had never really wanted to begin with. It was a tough lesson learned and I had completely embarrassed myself in the process.

I returned Luke's sweatshirt later that day. Luckily his roommate answered the door so I didn't have to see him and I just handed him the sweatshirt and left. Luke and I didn't speak again...ever. It was too hard for me to suck up my pride and admit that I had been rejected by someone who should have been chasing after me. Luke was just too annoyed to initiate any contact. Oh well. At least I'm still pretty.

Chapter 10: The One Who Never Should Have Been

The One Who Never Should Have Been

Mom, this is another one I really don't want you to read, but I know you will anyway. Please don't judge me. Love you! (Smiling sweet and innocently.)

I spent the summer after graduation at home in Portland. My best friend from college and I were moving to Atlanta, Georgia in August and I couldn't wait. I don't know what inspired me to move all the way across the country, but it was probably just a lack of options. I had no job lined up, all my friends were either still in school or working some place much more exciting than Portland, and I had no boyfriend to keep me at home. Apparently the knowledge of my impending life-changing-move inspired me to do something stupid, something which I now regret. I dated my ex boyfriend's best friend.

Chris had gone to high school with us but was a year older than me. The first time I dated Sam, remember that one week back in my junior year of high school, he had started flirting with me. It hadn't really stopped and I thought, at the time, that it was just his way of communicating. Why would one of my boyfriend's closest friends hit on me? Isn't there some kind of code that prevents this from happening?

Well, the second time I dated Sam, Chris was all over me. We bonded over our hatred of Hero, he would call me to hang out when Sam wasn't around, tackle me onto the couch when Sam was in the other room so he would return to find us in a semi-compromising position. He hinted at a threesome on more than one occasion. Sam laughed and I tried not to be offended. Now, back in high school, Chris hadn't been that good looking. From what I can recall, he was pretty awkward and always had some horrible pickup line he would use. I remember one day at a football game, some of my girlfriends and I decided we would wear sports bras and paint our stomachs to show our school spirit. The boys got jealous and wanted in on the action.

"What are you going to paint on me?" He had asked.

"You're going to be the C," I told him. Go Cardinals!

"I'd rather have you paint your phone number on me," he said with this cheesy grin.

"I don't think so."

And that set the standard for our entire friendship. Obviously Sam and Chris had a more established relationship. They had been friends since childhood and had grown up together, probably sharing a lot of memories. I know for a fact that Sam wasn't interested in sharing a girl.

Nevertheless, the summer before I left for Atlanta, I agreed to go on a date with Chris. We had been talking randomly on the phone (I'm not sure if Sam was aware of this) and I had seen him over spring break, so when I arrived back in Portland, Chris came over and announced he would be taking me out. He had grown up a lot since high school. He was no longer the tall, lanky goofball I remembered from my teen days. Rather, he was now tall, incredibly muscular, and an admitted womanizer. He knew he was good looking and used it to his advantage.

So the night of our date came around and I wasn't feeling all that nervous. I thought I knew what to expect...but I was wrong. Chris came to pick me up and I remembered the last time he was over and had stuck up a conversation with my father. They had both served in the military so I assumed my dad would love him. Nope. He could see right through Chris's act and knew that this kid only wanted to get into his daughter's

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pants. I had never had 'the talk' with my father, but I swear, the look he had given me that night was warning enough. Luckily, my parents were out of town so I didn't have my Dad's disapproving glare to deal with. I grabbed my purse, following Chris to his car. He held the door for me and I smiled, this was a pretty good start. What happened next should have been the only red flag I needed for the night. Chris walked around to the driver's side and waited for a minute before getting in. I had been busy putting on my seatbelt and finding a clean spot on the floor for my purse. But I heard the lock pop open and Chris slid in, giving me a look which caught me off guard.

"You know, I saw this movie once where a guy broke up with a girl because she didn't lean over the seat to unlock his door for him."

"Pardon me?"

"He said that he could tell what kind of girl she was because she didn't think to unlock his door."

I blinked and then looked down at the locks. They were indeed manual, meaning Chris had to physically insert the key into his door to open it. What a hardship.

I was really hoping that he was joking at this point. I mean, our date had just started. "And maybe I can tell a lot about a guy who doesn't have a car with automatic locks and windows," I countered, smiling so he would know I was teasing.

Chris smiled back, thank God, and then started his engine. We had been driving for less than a minute when he asked if I was cold.

"I'm a little chilly," I confirmed and I watched as he cranked the heat way up - literally as high as it would go.

Three minutes later and we were both sweating so he turned on the AC full blast.

Three minutes after that and my lips had turned blue so he flipped back to the heat and we were soon in a sauna again.

Now, normally I would have said something, perhaps offered to find a comfortable temperature, but this was too fascinating to watch and it went on until we had reached the restaurant. Chris parked the car and then looked at me.

"Do you mind if I bring my gun to dinner?"

"Your gun? You own a gun?"

He looked at me like I should have known better. "Of course I do."

"What do you need a gun for?"

"Protection."

"Against who? This is Portland, not Oakland."

"I just always carry it, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed. What did I care if he carried a gun?

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He then reached across me and opened the glove compartment and pulled out the biggest semi-automatic gun I had ever seen. It was silver and shiny and he tucked it into his pants under his shirt. Great. I was now on a date with a guy whose gun was more advanced than his locks and windows. This isn't fucking Texas, people!

Anyway, I got out of the car and Chris held my hand as we walked into the restaurant, the entire time I was thinking about what would happen if the gun misfired and shot my date in the ass. We were seated at a small table and before the hostess could walk away, Chris was already ordering drinks from her. She gave us a strange look, a very 'this isn't my job' type of expression, and informed us our server would be right over with our beverages. Our server did arrive shortly after and started to tell us the specials but was rudely interrupted by my date.

"I'll have the tenderloin, rare, and...Lydia, what do you want?"

"I'd like to hear the specials, please," I smiled at the server who gave me a grateful grin in return. He continued with his spiel and even though none of the specials sounded particularly tasty, I felt the need to order one. I opted for the salmon and Chris asked for an appetizer at the last minute.

Our conversation at dinner was flirty and informative. I learned what Chris did for a living - something that no one had really been able to explain to me - and he asked about Atlanta and my last months down at Santa Clara. Our appetizer arrived and was finished in about three bites, the plate was pushed to the edge of the table. As soon as our entrees were dropped, Chris asked for the check and the server was glad to oblige.

"Are you in a hurry or something?" I asked, unable to hide my frustration any longer.

"No," he answered, not offended but offering no explanation.

I shrugged my shoulders and tried to take as long as I possibly could to eat my meal.

After dinner Chris took me back to my house. We put in a movie and started snuggling on the couch. Snuggling turned into kissing, kissing turned into heavy petting, and before I was ready my dress was on the floor and his shirt was being pulled over his head. Not only was this moving way too quickly for me, but I was also starting to feel incredibly guilty that we were doing this behind Sam's back. I know that we had been broken up for over two years but if one of my best friends had started dating him, I wouldn't have been too happy, so I could only imagine how he would feel if he knew Chris and I were making out at the moment.

"Chris, maybe we should slow down," I said, pushing at his chest so he would sit up. But he didn't sit up, he just smiled down at me. That's when I froze. I didn't think Chris was going to force me to do anything I didn't want to do, but the look in his eye made me think he knew something I didn't know. What happened next caught me completely off guard. Chris started talking dirty.

"You look sexy as hell in only your bra and panties," he told me and my mouth dropped. It wasn't so much what he said, but how he said it. His voice was suddenly incredibly husky, as if sex was just oozing from his tongue.

"Thank you," I said once I regained the ability to speak.

"We should probably move this from the couch up to your room," he suggested and my head started spinning. Yes. Moving from the couch would be so much more convenient if we wished to accomplish what we had started. But no! I didn't want to sleep with him. Did I? I couldn't tell anymore.

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"It's going to feel so amazing," he continued in that voice that was driving me near insane. "Me on top of you, slowly pushing in and out."

What the fuck was happening to me? I should have been laughing at this but was so incredibly turned on I could barely nod my head to agree with him. Had it really been that long since I had slept with a guy? I guess it had been well over a year. I kept silent, because I really didn't know what to say. No one had ever said things like that to me before and the shock value was in no way understated.

Chris interpreted my silence to mean I had changed my mind about slowing down so he literally picked me up and carried me to my room. We fooled around on my bed for a little while before becoming completely naked. That's when I saw it: the biggest penis I had ever seen in my entire life.

"Oh my God!" I cried, mostly out of shock but Chris took it as a compliment.

"I know, right?" His sexy voice was gone and I frowned at him.

"I don't think that's going to fit," I told him honestly.

Chris laughed. "Sure it will."

"I really don't think so," I argued and took another look at it. No. There was no way in hell that thing would ever be inside of me. It was too scary.

I started shaking my head but Chris kissed me and calmed me down. We messed around a little bit more and then he put the condom on. Andâ I was right. It didn't fit. Not even close. But the problem was we were both so turned on we didn't want to give up without a fight. We tried and tried but to no avail. I was sore, he was exhausted, and neither one of us were satisfied. We fell asleep that night and woke up the next morning, both a little embarrassed by what had happened. I, for one, wanted him to leave as soon as possible. He, on the other hand, felt the need to make up for our inability to have sex by trying again. I politely asked him to leave.

Chris and I didn't see each other much after that night. It was, I suppose, a little strange for both of us. It probably would have been worse if we had actually slept together. The last time I spoke with him, he randomly brought up our date, not in the context of how frustrating it had been, but in the context of Sam never having found out. I hadn't spoken to Sam in over a year but assumed he and Chris were still good friends - not that Chris and I ever discussed that matter. He promised me that he had never and would never tell Sam about what happened that night and I believed him.

I'm not upset that things didn't work out with Chris. The date, the attempted sex, none of it should have happened in the first place. If Chris felt the need to keep the knowledge of our date from Sam, that probably meant that Sam would have been upset by it. And if someone was willing to deceive a friend just to get some girl into bed, then they definitely weren't worth my time.

Chapter 11: The One Who Broke My Heart

The One Who Broke My Heart

You'll have to excuse my attitude while I write this chapter. I'm going to try to not sound bitter, but I doubt I'll be able to help myself. Charlie and I went to middle school and high school together. You would hope I had learned my lesson about dating guys I went to school with but apparently I hadn't. We never dated during school, we barely spoke at all. He was kind of nerdy and kept to himself a lot but joined the ROTC in college and excelled, making a small name for himself around the University campus. My friend Annie took me to a party at his house a few weeks before I was scheduled to leave for Atlanta. Charlie was moving to Georgia as well though he would be living down in Columbus at Fort Benning. I was still excited to have someone I knew in the same state considering I was moving nearly 3,000 miles away from all my friends and family.

Charlie and I hung out at the party and got to know each other a little better. I kept on getting these ugly glances from some girl who I hadn't met before and Annie told me it was Charlie's ex-girlfriend. The one who had cheated on him and had a baby with some other guy. Poor Charlie. That must have been terrible for him. At some point in the evening, Charlie invited me to go rafting with him and some of his friends. I agreed because white water rafting is one of my favorite things to do.

So that weekend, along with Ali, we all brought our sleeping bags and swim suits and trusted Charlie and his friend Walker to guide us down the river. We only fell out once so I considered it to be a success. What was also a success was the fact that I now had myself a new boyfriend. Charlie had kissed me while we were hiding under a blanket, trying to escape from the swarms of mosquitoes. It was so romantic!

Charlie wasn't the best looking guy. Apart from his amazing physique (which was unfortunately hidden under a layer of body hair), he was nothing to write home about. He was shy - really shy - but very sweet and unbelievably strong, physically that is. We went out a few times before I had to leave for Atlanta and he was really upset to see me go.

My mom and I were driving the minivan to Georgia (can you believe that thing was still around?) and we had stopped in Norman, Oklahoma to visit family. My aunt was incredibly giddy when I walked in the door and immediately showed me the huge bouquet of flowers that had arrived for me only early that morning. Attached was a note from Charlie which told me that he couldn't wait to see me again and that he missed me like crazy. It was probably the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me.

When we were finally both in Georgia, we spent as much time together as we could. Turns out Fort Benning is about 90 minute drive from Atlanta so it was easy for me to see him on the weekends. He would come up to the city as often as he could and things moved really fast as far as our emotions were concerned. I distinctly remember when he told me that he loved me. We had been together for about three months and he had left me a message when I was at work.

"Hey, Lydia. I was just calling to say that I missed you and I was thinking about you. I know you're at work, but I just wanted to hear your voice. I love you...(incredibly long pause). I mean...I'll talk to you later."

I knew he hadn't meant to say it just then. He had probably wanted to do something romantic, take me out to dinner and make a big speech, so I didn't ask him about it when I called him back. That weekend when he came to see me I could tell that he was nervous. He had some friends with him and we all went out dancing - which he couldn't do very well - so I waited until we were alone to reciprocate his feelings.

"Are you having fun?" I asked as we sat down in a quiet corner.

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"Yeah, are you?"

I smiled and nodded my head, knowing what I was about to say.

"I don't know how you put up with me and my dancing," Charlie teased me.

Hello, opportunity. "It's probably because I love you."

Charlie looked surprised and then unbelievably happy. "You heard my message?"

"I did," I confirmed.

"I didn't want to tell you like that. It just slipped out and then I couldn't take it back and I was really hoping you hadn't heard."

"I thought it was really sweet," I promised him.

"I do love you," he said, taking my hand. "And I wanted to tell you, just in the right way."

"Hey, it makes for a good story, right?"

"Right," Charlie laughed and we kissed.

After that, things sped up even more. Pretty soon we were talking marriage and kids. He had been planning on going to Korea for a year and completely changed his plans because of me. He told me about being transferred to somewhere in Kansas and wanted me to go live with him. I actually looked up places to live in Kansas. Kansas. What the fuck? It helped that my parents adored him. I had finally found one of the good guys and he was head over heels in love with me. I was floating to and from work every day, completely smitten.

We lived for months in complete bliss, both of us crazy about the other, until the holidays came. Charlie had a two week leave lined up and I had only been granted three days off from my job, all of which I would be spending in Seattle instead of Portland. We knew we weren't going to see each other but that hadn't mattered before. We had gone longer than two weeks when he was on assignment somewhere and during those times, we hadn't even been able to talk on the phone. Charlie called me on Christmas eve, called me on Christmas day, called me everyday until he left for his friend's cabin for New Year's. There wasn't going to be much reception but he promised to call from a land line at midnight Atlanta time. But the call never came. I waited for three days, calling his cell phone incessantly, leaving messages, begging him to call me back. At first I thought something had happened to him. But after a couple of days, I knew if he had been hurt, his parents or his friends would have called to let me know. That's when I became angry. There was absolutely no reason he couldn't have called by now. I knew he was back from the cabin so why hadn't he called?

Charlie had left his car in my driveway while he was home in Oregon. It was this old truck (almost as old as the minivan) and I opened the door with every intention of locking the keys inside and never speaking to him again. That's when I saw the papers in the backseat. They were printed from a website and he had clearly been researching engagement rings. About four pages of possible rings had been printed and I examined each and every one, my heart pounding out of my chest. I was getting engaged! I couldn't believe it! I knew I should still be angry at Charlie but I couldn't help it. I mean, I was getting engaged and I'm sure he had a legitimate reason for not calling.

That evening I picked him up at the airport and immediately asked him why he hadn't called, expecting a legitimate excuse and a proposal. His answer nearly killed me.

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"I don't know why I haven't called," he said, refusing to look at me.

"I don't really believe you. You don't just stop calling your girlfriend for no reason."

Charlie sighed and finally looked up. "I feel that we've lost the spark from our relationship."

"The spark? I don't quite understand what you mean."

"You know, the spark."

No, repeating the word didn't help. "So, does that mean you don't love me anymore?"

"Not at all."

"Does that mean that you aren't attracted to me anymore?"

"You know I think you are beautiful."

"What the hell does it mean, then?"

"I don't know what it means."

This was so frustrating. Just tell me what you want! Why is that so hard? So I gave him an option, opened the door of possibilities. "Look, Charlie, if you want to break up with me then please just do it. I'm really confused right now and I don't understand what you want me to do about this whole spark we seem to have lost."

He looked shocked. "I don't want to break up."

"So, what do you want to do? Because I can't take you not calling again. It nearly broke my heart."

"I'm sorry," he said. "It won't happen again."

"Okay." I didn't feel like we were making any progress and he certainly hadn't asked me to marry him yet. I wondered where he was keeping the ring.

Over the next few days I started thinking about things I could do to find the spark again. I went to the mall and picked up some new lingerie and some running shoes. I hate running. But Charlie loved it and I wanted to show interest in the things he liked. I started eating sushi with him, going for runs, letting him take me to the shooting range where I fired an actual weapon; we had sex all the fucking time and it was all because of that damn spark.

I asked Charlie only once if he thought the spark had come back into our relationship. We were jogging, (kill me now) and I pointed out all the time we had been spending together and all the plans we had made. But he didn't answer my question. He just smiled and told me that he loved me. I knew there was something he wasn't telling me but I couldn't figure out what it was.

Sometime in February was when Charlie went home to visit his family. He promised he would call but he didn't. I was heartbroken again, embarrassed that I had let this happen twice. And I had had enough. I didn't need this stress. I didn't need Charlie in my life. I deserved better. So when he came back to Georgia, I broke up with him. It was the hardest breakup I have ever been through. I cried and cried and told Charlie that I

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didn't want to do it but he had left me no choice. He didn't disagree and left without any promise of keeping in touch.

It wasn't until two months later that I learned what had really been going on. My friend Annie called, clearly distraught over something.

"Did you and Charlie break up?" She asked and I realized I had forgotten to tell her.

"Yeah. He was being weird and not calling me. I couldn't handle it anymore so I broke up with him. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, I've just been kind of a mess."

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to hate me?"

I laughed out loud. "I promise."

"Charlie is getting married."

"What?"

"He's getting married in a couple months."

"How...why? I'm sorry, what?"

That's when Annie started confessing the entire story. "I ran into Walker at the store the other day and he asked if I was going to Charlie's wedding. I couldn't believe that he had asked you to marry him and you hadn't told me. Walker looked all confused and said that you two had been broken up since November and that Charlie was getting ready to marry his ex-girlfriend. They've been back together since before New Year's"

My heart broke all over again. Those rings that I found, those had been for her. They were never intended for me. I took a deep breath, determined not to cry any more tears over Charlie. "We broke up in February."

"Lydia, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I mean, I'm not okay right now, but I will be. I'm glad you told me instead of having to find out over Facebook or something."

"Do you want me to crash the wedding for you?" She asked, just like the amazing friend she's always been.

"No," I laughed. "I'm sure City Hall is lovely this time of year. I wouldn't want to ruin the magic for them."

Annie laughed as well and I realized, after screaming and yelling out my frustration for a good ten minutes, that getting over Charlie would now be a lot easier. The so called spark that we had lost was in no way my fault and there was nothing I could have done to get it back. I wasn't who Charlie wanted and I would learn to be okay with that. Though, why he would want some ugly ex girlfriend who cheated on him and had another man's baby is completely beyond me.

"So what are you going to do now?" Annie asked after I had finished my bitching session.

"I don't know," I said and I really hadn't thought about it. "I think I'll write a blog about it."

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"Seriously?"

"Probably."

And that was that. I wrote a very lengthy blog on my MySpace page, confessing everything that had happened including my misinterpretation of the wedding ring photos. I'm not, or at least I wasn't the type of girl who normally shares her secrets with the world. I would rarely talk about my relationships with any of my good friends, much less the masses of online friends. But it was actually incredibly therapeutic and liberating to share what had happened to me. The best part was the response I received. Not once did I use Charlie's name, but those friends who I had gone to school with knew who I was referring to. They thanked me for being so honest, praised me for focusing my anger on him and not the other woman. I didn't feel like a good person writing these things, I didn't think my story would help anyone but maybe it did.

I don't think his wife ever knew about me. He probably told her the same thing he told everyone else: that we had broken up a month before they got back together. But now Walker knew the truth. Now most of our high school knew the truth. I'm sure most if not all of his friends stuck by him because I'm sure he had his reasons for doing what he did. But I couldn't find them. I mean, I told him to break up with me if he didn't want me anymore. I made it so easy, and he was just too selfish or scared. There is so much I could say about him right now, but I honestly don't want to waste the effort.

After that phone conversation with Annie, I promised myself that I wasn't going to settle for another loser. I wasn't going to date someone because it was convenient or because I wanted them to like me. I wasn't going to fall in love until I knew that he was the right guy for me. And this little plan of mine, it totally worked.

Chapter 12: The Ones Who Had Some Competition

The Ones Who Had Some Competition

Long before my split with Charlie, I had figured out that two guys I worked with had small crushes on me. I was working at a popular restaurant in Midtown, Atlanta as the office manager. I did the schedule and expedited food during the day. I was overworked and underpaid but having a great time so it didn't really matter. The sous-chef, Kevin, had been flirting with me ever since I started working there. One of the servers, Malik, had been flirting with me ever since I had worn my little black dress to work. Both saw how bad my breakup with Charlie was for me and both took very different approaches to helping me cope. Kevin invited me to the movies, dinners out and relaxing afternoons spent in seclusion at his apartment. Malik got me drunk. I was good friends with both and appreciated all of their efforts.

Of course, I was in no condition to jump into another relationship but wasn't opposed to the idea of dating. Kevin was sweet and had his life together. He wanted to be a chef and was more passionate about cooking than anyone I had ever seen. He wasn't completely unpleasant to look at either though he couldn't dress himself to save his life. He was from Ohio and just looked like a good All-American type of guy. Malik was from Algeria and the exact opposite of Kevin. He was gorgeous and full of himself and always wore designer clothes. He had a new girlfriend every three weeks, was an insatiable flirt, and had some shady business ventures which he ran when he wasn't waiting tables.

It was Kevin who kissed me first. We were at his apartment watching TV and he actually asked me if he could kiss me.

"I know you just broke up with someone so I understand if you aren't ready."

"No. We can give it a shot," I said and smiled at his expression. I wouldn't know if I was ready until I tried and, as it turns out, I was more than ready. Kevin's kiss was exactly what I had expected it to be: sweet and gentle, just like him. He didn't try anything else that day but let me snuggle against him as we finished whatever show we were watching.

Malik kissed me shortly after Kevin. We were at some club in downtown Atlanta and I knew absolutely no one but him and he seemed to know everyone that passed our table. Malik stayed by my side the entire night and even though he didn't drink, he bought me a few glasses of champagne.

"How are you doing?" He asked after my third glass.

"I'm great. How are you?"

Malik laughed. He was always laughing and it was rather contagious. "I'm wonderful."

I smiled back and there watched as he glanced down at my lips. This made me blush and I tried to hide my face by looking in the other direction but Malik had already caught my face in his hand.

"You're beautiful when you blush," he said and then leaned in so he could kiss me.

Just like Kevin, Malik's kiss was exactly what I expected it to be. Passionate, rough, and sexy as hell. He let me spend the night at his apartment since I had been drinking and couldn't drive home. He was a gentleman and slept on the couch, woke me up the next morning and bought me breakfast.

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I'm pretty sure that Malik and Kevin weren't friends before I started dating both of them so I don't think they ever talked about their dating lives with each other. I was pretty much in the clear. Plus, I had made no commitment to either of them and was free to date whomever I wanted. Okay, so I know that dating someone I worked with wasn't the best idea and dating two guys from the same restaurant was by far the dumbest idea I ever had, but I was only having fun and the guys knew I wasn't looking for anything serious.

I had been dating (please note I said dating and not sleeping with) both Malik and Kevin for a little over a month when I met Jackson. Jackson was a friend of a friend and had this unbelievably cute southern accent. The night we met, we were practically inseparable and talked about almost everything. I drove him home that night and he asked for my number, telling me how excited he was to take me out on a date. Let me tell you, I was really thrilled about this new guy. He seemed like the perfect combination of everything I liked about my other men. He had a great sense of humor, a steady job, a gorgeous face, and seemed to be really into me. Not that I wasn't having a great time with Malik and Kevin, but dating multiple people at once really allows you to analyze and judge your relationships. I could literally see where each relationship would lead if I were to start dating one of the men exclusively. With Malik, I knew I would become insanely jealous of his flirting, even if he had committed to me. And with Kevin, I knew I would become bored because even though I appreciated it at the time, we never did anything exciting. It was always dinner or his apartment for a movie. He just didn't seem to like much adventure.

My date with Jackson was set for one Friday after work. Kevin had left the restaurant at this point and was running his own place somewhere north of the city. Malik, I knew because I did the schedule, had the night off so it was safe for Jackson to pick me up at work because neither of my other guys would be there. Oh, how wrong I was. That night, that very night, Kevin decided he was going to bring some friends in for a drink. They were sitting on the patio when I got off of work and went to wait at the bar. I tried to avoid them but I knew they were there and he could obviously see me. That's when Malik walked in, gave me a hug (because we never showed anymore affection at work) and told me he was covering a shift for someone. The two guys shared an awkward glance and head nod and then Malik disappeared into the back to change. Great. Now a third would be coming to pick me up. I was fucked.

I called Jackson and requested that he just text me when he was outside so I could make a run for it and avoid an awkward situation. He agreed and thirty minutes after he was supposed to be there, he finally texted. I had just finished my second glass of champagne and ran out of there like my ass was on fire, not saying a thing to either Kevin or Malik.

Jackson took me his favorite sports bar that evening. He lived north of the Perimeter so it was a good thirty minute drive from the restaurant where my car had been parked. We walked in to the establishment and my face scowled involuntarily. It reeked of smoke and spilt beer, there were guys with cut off shorts and tank tops on playing darts, and a few too many video poker games. Damn, I thought Jackson was a classy type of guy. But I shook off my disappointment and allowed him to buy me a drink. So what if he wanted to keep things casual? I could do casual.

Jackson and I fell into easy conversation but somewhere along the way he started talking about religion.

"I just recently found Jesus again," he announced.

"Had you lost him?" I asked.

"Yes."

I blinked, waiting for him to explain. He took a long sip of his beer and then explained the story. Apparently Jackson had been going through a bit of a rough patch until just a few months ago. He had been sleeping

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around, smoking weed, and drinking. But something, I don't remember what, had opened his eyes and he had returned to his church and gotten his life back together.

"It's great that you found some direction again," I said, smiling at him genuinely.

"Have you found Jesus?"

Now, I don't mind discussing religion, I'm actually really amenable to that conversation, but is that really a first date type of question? Maybe it is, but my religious background is slightly confusing and rather fuzzy to explain so I'm not usually eager to speak about it.

"No. I haven't found Jesus," I told him honestly.

"Really?" He looked fascinated. "So you aren't a Christian? Do you believe in God?"

"Yes, I believe in God, but I'm not sure that organized religion is really my kind of thing."

"What do you mean?" Jackson was suddenly confused.

I knew I would have to explain everything. "Well, my parents never took me to church of any kind when I was young. But then they sent me to a Jewish summer camp where we had to take Jewish enrichment classes everyday so for a while that was the only religion I knew anything about. But then I went to a Jesuit college and had to take religion classes to graduate so...yeah. I'm just comfortable in my faith as is."

Jackson was frowning at this point. "But what is your faith?"

This was getting a little too deep for me. "I believe in God and I believe that he has a plan for me but I need to figure that out myself by living a productive and honest life. I know the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, and I just always try to be a good person. I haven't prescribed to any religion because I haven't found one that really suits me."

"My church teaches me that anyone who doesn't accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior is going to hell," Jackson stated very matter-of-factly.

I set my drink on the table and stared at him. Was this guy for real? Don't get me wrong, I support faith in any form, but pushing your religion on people, especially on a first date, is just rude.

"Did you just tell me that I'm going to hell?"

Jackson shrugged. "I'm not saying, I'm just saying."

Holy shit! This was the first time I had ever heard that expression. I loved it. What a brilliant way of being passive aggressive. I didn't even mind that I had just been told I was going to hell, Jackson had opened my eyes to a whole new way of insulting people and I was slightly turned on.

"How about we just change the subject," I suggested, hoping that he would forgive my sins and still want to finish this date.

He thought this was a pretty good idea and we continued our evening. Once we had drank enough beer and watched enough sports, Jackson asked if I would like to go back to his place to see his puppy. Um, puppy? Yes, please! We got into his car and he held my hand across the console. Things seemed to be getting back on

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track.

Once at his house, he let me hold his little bulldog puppy and then we settled onto the couch to watch a movie. I don't remember which one it was but that really didn't matter because before the opening credits were finished, Jackson's hand was on my leg and he was leaning in for a kiss. Now, I had been pretty good about interpreting and predicting kissing styles but this one caught me completely off guard. I had expected Jackson to know what he was doing. I mean, come on, he had just finished telling me that he had been sleeping around and drinking. In my experience, those two things usually involved kissing. Apparently not. Jackson kissed me once and then opened his mouth to kiss me again. But that was it. There was no tongue, no movement of the lips, just a wide open mouth pressed against mine. I, having felt his lips part mine, had been ready to reciprocate and promptly stuck my tongue in his mouth but was met with nothing. It was like poking my tongue into an empty water glass, there was just...nothing.

I always try not to panic but to think that I hadn't noticed my date didn't have a tongue struck me as somewhat of an emergency. We had been out for at least three hours and I hadn't noticed? How terrible of me! But he had that adorable southern accent. Certainly he couldn't have created that drawl without a tongue. So I pulled away and asked him the first question that came to my mind just so I could see him speak.

"Where's your bathroom?"

Jackson smiled and I stared at his mouth. "It's just down the hall. Do you want me to show you?" There it was! I saw his tongue! And it looked to be in perfectly good condition.

"No. I'm good," I said and pulled him in for another kiss. Maybe he had just been nervous. So I kissed him again and took control this time. I opened his lips just slightly and then teased him with my tongue. He seemed to like it so I tried for a little more and was met with...nothing. I pulled away again, quicker this time because I really didn't understand what I was doing wrong.

"What's the matter?" Jackson asked, his tongue moving fluidly in his mouth.

I frowned. "Nothing."

Jackson frowned as well and took his sweet time before leaning in again. I cringed as he kissed me, still unable to keep my tongue in my own mouth - I think this was just out of habit. Damn-it! I was going to find this tongue if it took me all night! I searched and searched, feeling as if I was making out with an empty beer bottle. But there was nothing and I still, to this day, have no idea where he was hiding it. We both pulled away at the same time and tried not to look at each other.

"Did you hear that?" Jackson asked, clearly flustered at this point.

"Hear what?"

"There was a noise at the door."

"Really?" I had heard nothing but the TV.

"I should probably take you home."

"Yes, please!" I flew off the couch and grabbed my purse. I don't necessarily believe in the hell Jackson so clearly thought I was destined for, but I was assuming this was about as hellish as anything could get.

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He drove me home in silence and I stared out the window, trying not to remember how his kiss had felt.

"This was fun, Jackson. Thank you," I said as I climbed out of his car and got into mine.

"Do you want to do it again some time?" He asked and I could tell he was hoping I would turn him down.

"Um, we'll see. You can call me later if you want."

"Right. Okay." And with that, he was gone.

As I drove home that night, I thought about how happy I was that I hadn't put all my eggs in one basket. Tomorrow, I could go to the gym, work off the steam from my new found hell, and then call Malik so I could kiss out the sexual frustration I now felt. Because for an ex man-whore and alcoholic, Jackson really didn't have a lot to offer. I'm not saying. I'm just saying.

Chapter 13: The One

The One

After my date with Jackson, I woke up in a foul mood. Not only had I been told I was going to hell, but I had also experienced what was decidedly the worst kiss of my entire life. I needed to blow off some steam so I put on my bright green sweat pants, a thin white tank top, my red sports bra, my pink sneakers and drove to the gym. I looked hot. My workouts always start and end with cardio so I headed straight for the elliptical and climbed on the machine at the end of a long row. Since it was pretty early in the morning on a Saturday, I was practically the only one at the gym. There was some meathead lifting weights, a couple going through all the machines and some teenager walking the track talking on his cell phone.

Now, only two things really bother me at the gym: gym divas and people who work out while on their cell phone. Gym divas are those girls who do their hair and makeup and then put on the skimpiest outfit they can find in the hopes of attracting men. Girls, you're at the gym. Work out. People who talk on their phone at the gym are just as bad as those who talk on their phone at movie theatres. Seriously? You can't turn off your phone for two hours? Don't half-ass your work out by catching up with friends. Commit to something, people!

Normally I let my irrational irritation with these types slide off my back but today I was angry and I found this kid walking the track to be the rudest person in the entire world. That was until some crazy bitch got on the elliptical next to me. There were 19 other elliptical machines open, each one in working order, and this woman had to get on the one right next to me? What was her problem? I turned my iPod up loud enough so she could hear it, hoping that she wouldn't try to strike up a conversation.

Ten minutes into my workout and the woman was still there and my blood was boiling. What was wrong with these people? Didn't anyone teach them manners? That's when I saw the kid from the track approaching my machine. He was staring at me with a somewhat apprehensive look on his face and when he was within an arm's reach of me, he spoke. My iPod was still turned up so I could only see his lips moving. What the fuck did he want? Had I dropped something? I took the ear phones off and glared at him.

"What?" I snapped.

"Hi. Um, Miss, I was wondering if you would like to go out to dinner with me...sometime." His southern accent was really thick and I still hadn't gotten used to people calling me Miss. Also, he looked even younger close up. Judging from his baby face, his t-shirt and shorts, I would have placed him around 16 years old. All right, so I know Ashton Kutcher kind of paved the way for guys dating older women, but this kid was no Ashton and I really didn't think I looked young enough to still be in high school. Who did he think he was?

I blinked and then glanced at the woman next to me. She had this goofy grin on her face but was trying to look as if she wasn't listening in on our conversation. You aren't fooling anyone, honey!

My first reaction was to tell this kid to get lost and go find someone his own age but I had someone listening to my conversation and I didn't want her to think I was rude. I know she was least favorite person at the moment, but still, I didn't want to be the bitchy one. Also, if this kid went to my gym I would most likely run into him again. Creating an awkward situation now would only lead to uncomfortable glances and glares later on in my gym life so I decided that being rude was just out of the question.

I smiled as sweetly as I could manage and looked down at him. "I don't want to commit to a dinner, seeing as I don't know you, but I'll give you my phone number and we can go from there."

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This seemed to please him so he brought out his phone which was obviously already in his pocket and took down my digits.

"Great," he said. "I'm Joe by the way."

"I'm Lydia."

"I'll call you later then?"

"Okay, bye." And with that I put my ear phones back on and turned up my elliptical to full speed.

Now I thought this situation would be easy to diffuse. I would talk to Joe whenever he called, casually mention that I was 22 years old and it would be considered illegal if we actually went out on a date, we would laugh about it and then I could give him tips on how to pick up girls in the cafeteria at school. No big deal.

He called and left a message one day when I was at work and I think I spoke to him for the first time the next day.

"Hey, Lydia. It's Joe."

"Hi, Joe. How's it going?"

"Fine. How are you?" What I really wanted to ask was 'how was school today?'. But I didn't.

"Great. You said you wanted to talk before committing to a dinner so I'm calling to talk."

"Right. About that, how old are you?" I didn't feel the need to waste time with small talk.

"I'm 24. What about you?"

24? You've gotta be fucking kidding me. My plan had just been shot to hell and now I was going to have to come up with another way to get rid of this guy.

"I'm 22. Are you sure about your age? Because you don't look 24."

Joe laughed and I smiled. His laugh was so genuine. "I get that all the time, actually."

"I bet you do."

Joe and I chatted for a little bit and then I told him I had to hang up because I was driving home. We hadn't agreed to go out but he had said he would call me later in the week. Well, good. I had all week to think up some reason why I couldn't date him. But as the days passed, I couldn't think of any reason and had been avoiding his calls - something which I hate doing but couldn't think of another option. I was still dating Malik, Kevin had kind of faded into North Atlanta and I wasn't seeing him as often, and was seriously considering having 'the talk' with the one guy I had left. That's when Joe cornered me at the gym. I had just walked in one afternoon and he found me on my way to the stationary bikes.

"Did you just get here?" He asked. He still looked like he was 16.

"Yep. You?"

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"Um, yeah." He looked like he was waiting for me to continue the conversation but I really wasn't in the mood.

"I'm going to the bikes, if you want to join me." Cardio machines are usually populated by women so I assumed Joe would decline my offer.

"Sure. I'll just finish up some weights and I'll come find you."

Damn-it. "Great. See you then."

I headed over and turned on my iPod. It looked like I was actually going to have to talk this guy. As I sat there, peddling in one place, I started to question why I had such an objection to this sweet southern boy. Besides the fact I thought he was 16, there really wasn't any other reason I shouldn't give him a chance. He was attractive, in a juvenile sort of way, had a wonderfully delightful southern accent, and seemed pretty eager to get to know me. So as I saw Joe wondering over to the stationary bikes, I made up my mind to give him a chance.

We ended up talking for hours that night. After I was done with the bikes, we walked around the track for miles and miles and miles. Turns out that Joe played the guitar and sings. Um, hi. Sexy much? We talked about music, we talked about our jobs, we talked about almost everything and by the end of the night, he had asked me to come to his softball game that weekend. I went, dragging my friend Michelle along with me, and we all went out for dinner after the game. Joe and I were dating.

Not long after our first official date (he took me out to dinner - no friends to buffer the conversation), my parents announced they were flying to Atlanta to see me. Now, as you could probably already tell from my past stories, I'm really close with my mom. She's my best friend and means the world to me. My dad is no different and whenever they don't like someone I'm dating, I know that things aren't going to work out. I introduce everyone to my parents because their opinion matters and I like to test the guys I'm dating. If they are dating me, they have to like my family because they are most likely going to be spending a lot of time with them.

I had these two guys who I had been casually seeing, and couldn't make up my mind to date one of them or keep seeing both. Malik was talking about commitment and Joe was just too sweet for words. I had to make a decision. So I asked Malik if he wanted to go to lunch and meet my parents.

"Yeah, girl, I don't do the parents thing. It's not my style."

"Fair enough," I responded and quickly called Joe.

Joe was more excited about the idea of meeting my parents. He couldn't do lunch because he was working but he agreed to meet us for dinner and we set the date.

That night I showed up at the restaurant and Joe was already there. He was sitting out on the patio and wearing his sun glasses when my parents and I joined him. He stood up and shook my dad's hand and then greeted my mom before giving me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"I have a little problem," he whispered as we were sitting down.

"What's wrong?" I asked, trying to hide whatever it was from my parents.

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"I wasn't wearing my safety glasses today and a piece of metal cut my eye." Joe did electrical maintenance on traffic intersections and was in unbelievably good shape. The fact that he worked with his hands made him even more attractive.

"Are you okay?"

"Well, it hurts."

"Did you go to the doctor?" I asked, a little worried for him and his vision.

"I will tomorrow."

"Why didn't you go today?"

Even from behind his glasses I could see that he was giving me a strange look. "Because I was meeting your parents and didn't want to cancel."

"That's really sweet but how's your eye?"

"It's been better," he admitted and then took off his glasses. His eye was disgusting. It was swollen and red, a gross substance oozing from it.

"Okay," I had to look away. "Maybe you should just leave your glasses on all night."

And he did.

Malik's refusal to meet my parents pretty much sealed the deal for Joe. I ended things with Malik and Joe started introducing me as his girlfriend. He came out to Portland for my 23rd birthday and met all my friends and family, impressing everyone with how comfortable he was with himself and with all the fuss surrounding our new relationship. After Charlie, my friends and family had been worried about me and were pleasantly surprised when they found out I had started dating such a great guy.

Joe was unbelievably kind, and not only to me, but to everyone. He had southern charm just radiating from him and was a gentleman 24/7. I never had to open my own door or pull out my own chair. His arm was always offered when I was walking in high heels, his jacket was always off and around my shoulders before I even realized I was cold. I wasn't used to being treated this way. I didn't know how much I would actually enjoy it. Oh, and you know his cell phone at the gym? Turns out he had been talking to his best friend, getting encouragement and advice on how to ask me out. Didn't I feel like the jackass?

I had fallen for Joe without even realizing what had happened. It wasn't love at first sight, there was no sudden lightning bolt that shot through my heart when I realized that I had fallen. It happened gradually as we got to know each other, a tiny flame which grew and grew until one day I was in love.

Eleven months after I met Joe, we were driving to dinner and I was listening to him talk about his future plans.

"I'm going to go back to school and get my degree," he was saying and I was listening, nodding in support. "And, I'd like to marry you, preferably within the next year."

My head turned in disbelief. Had I heard him correctly? "You want to marry me?"

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"Well, yeah. What do you think?"

I didn't have to think about it. "I'd like that," I said, a little flustered and a little surprised. Was he really proposing?

"Great!" Joe said and started digging through his pocket with one hand still on the wheel. He pulled out a large gold ring and handed it to me. "I don't have a proper ring yet, and I haven't asked your father, but my high school ring will have to do until then."

I took the ring and looked at it, wondering what I was supposed to do with it. It was too big for any of my fingers, even my thumb and the next best thing I could do was hang it on a chain and wear it around my neck.

"Don't worry, you don't have to wear it," Joe smiled at me.

"I would if it fit," I offered. "So are we really doing this? Are we really getting married?"

The smile stayed on Joe's face and he glanced at me from the driver's seat. "Lydia, I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. I love you so much."

"I love you too."

A month later and I was officially engaged. Joe and I had picked out the perfect ring, a pink sapphire set into white gold with diamonds around the band. One night, he took me out to dinner, got down on one knee and asked for my hand in marriage. It was so surreal. The entire wait staff started clapping and pretty soon all the tables surrounding us had realized what had happened and were congratulating Joe, asking me if they could see the ring.

My friends were called and the date was set. The wedding took place the following year at an old Southern mansion. My entire family made the trip to Georgia and my five best friends were my bridesmaids along with Joe's sister. I remember walking down the aisle with my dad and thinking about how lucky I was. Joe has never made me cry, together we have grown so much as a couple and also as individuals. He makes me want to be a better person and no one understands me like he does.

We've now been married for two and a half years and I love him more and more each day. Last year we bought our first house, we have two dogs and I'm waiting rather impatiently for him to finish school so we can have a baby. (I want a little boy who looks just like his father.) I know Joe is going to be a great dad and he's already a wonderful husband. I wake up next to him every day, knowing that I am the luckiest girl in the world.

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