

## Chapter One

“Is Love Only an Illusion?”

They are going to cut her in half.

Or so they claim. As I pass the sign for the magician coming to town, I grimace in pain. I have never been fond of the circus, magicians, or anyone that plays tricks on you in order to supply others with entertainment. I find it to be creepy and a bit odd. What kind of person gets their jollies from making others question themselves and more importantly, question reality?

A long time ago, I believed in magic. I believed that people could levitate a magic box. I believed that magicians could read minds. I even believed that little white doves could and would actually fly out of a sleek black scarf.

I lost my appetite for magic the first time someone broke my heart. Naturally, it was not the first time that I had been heartbroken, but it was the first time that someone took my heart, tore it up, and danced on the little pieces. At that moment, I was no longer “Missy Lawrence: Believer of all things magical.” No, no, at that moment, I became “Missy Lawrence: Most likely to fall for it every time.”

When I was younger, I fell in love with a guy named Nathan Hamilton. I have never been able to forgive the transgressions that he made during the tenure of our relationship. But, I have been able to white wash a few of them. I still speak with Nathan occasionally, and frankly can never quite pull the trigger when it comes to cutting him out altogether. I suppose that is because I owe him for helping me out of my first official heartbreak. After all, it was Nathan who held my hand and told me to “get over it” after Drew performed his little magic trick. I’ve always been a fan of the tough love myself, so I was able to move on, but my heart still struggles to heal from the Drew affair.

In an effort to shake the past from my mind’s eye, I decided to touch up my lipstick. If a girl looks her best, it will always follow that she will feel her best too. Just as I was leaning in to get a better look at my reflection in the storefront window, my phone rang.

“Hello? Missy Lawrence,” I answered.

“Missy, 7 a.m. tomorrow, Town Hall, be there,” a heavy boom reverberated through my cell. I turned down the volume.

“Hello, Ross. Pleasure speaking to you too. 7 a.m.? Tomorrow?”

“Missy, I don’t have time for this game. I’ve got things to do.”

“Like what?” I thought.

“Missy. . . Missy! Are you listening to me?” Ross boomed again into the receiver. I thought my head was vibrating.

“Boss, I’m all ears. Whatcha need?”

“Big story, tomorrow morning. The governor is coming to town. We need you there to catch his speech. Don’t be late. Pick up your crew at the station at seven and be at Town Hall by quarter after seven. The speech begins at 10 and you can’t afford to be in the back for this one.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” The good little soldier that I am nodded dutifully and mentally noted that in order to be at the station at 7 a.m., I would need to get up around half past five in order to get my hair and makeup in some kind of order. Priorities, ladies--priorities.

While I was contemplating my next move, I was oblivious to the continuing conversation that was ensuing on the other end of my cell.

“Yes, boss,” I said in monotone. I wasn’t sure if that was the response that he had been looking for, since I had not been listening, but, “yes, boss,” seemed better than “huh?”

Ross stopped mid-sentence as if to contemplate my “yes, boss” reply. He began again by reiterating his previous orders.

“Lawrence, be there at 7 a.m. and don’t stand in the back.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered in a clipped way and ended the phone call. This conversation was at a standstill. I figured that meant that we were done. Sometimes, there is just no polite way to end a business call, so it is best to just end it.

Ross Neil is the station manager at WSTA Charlotte. When I say station manager, I mean that Ross is the guy that tells everyone else what to do. He sits in a comfy chair, pushes a few buttons, and uses his loudspeaker style voice to toss the rest of the lemmings in the direction of the next big news story. Ross would be a great boss, except that he doesn’t care and he’s never there.

He doesn’t care what happens to anyone at the station. The only thing that preoccupies his time is getting the best ratings and working towards the next promotion. He’s never there, because as he always makes quite clear,

he spends as little time at the office as humanly possible. He has way too many high priority things to do. He can't suffer to be stuck with the peons in the office all day.

If he never had to show up at all, I'm sure Ross would try to pull a Great and Powerful Oz trick; the big face and a little man spinning the wheels behind the curtain. I would like to say I'm entertained by Ross Neil and his thoughtless antics, but I expect more out of people, especially a colleague; in particular, a boss.

Despite the qualms with my boss, I like my job. I wouldn't say I love it, because I am still climbing the ladder of success, but luckily my climb has been steady and I have enjoyed crawling my way up the rungs. I remember fondly the days of working the camera. Did I say fondly? I mean, I hated every minute of those days behind the camera. I wanted to be on-screen. I wanted to be the one talking to major politicians, reeling in a big scoop, and going to the celebrity parties in order to get the firsthand account from the stars themselves.

Working in the television industry is not exactly the way I pictured it growing up. There is a lot of drama that even though you think you understand, you never really comprehend until you are able to suffer through it yourself. But, that's life, isn't it? We all have our trials to bear. If my only problem in the world is that my boss is a little untouchable, then I consider myself a very lucky lady.

My friend, Ethan Smalls, who started working at the station about the same time I did, just popped in with a text message.

"Do you want to meet me for coffee later today? Mel is driving me crazy."

Ethan and I have been pals since we both started working camera together. Shortly before I began working as a field reporter, Ethan was offered the cosmetician's job. He considered what he did an "art," and frankly, some days I felt like he could work miracles with his gigantic blush brush and concealer pads.

I knew that this offer from Ethan was a huge cry for help. Ethan had been smitten by Melody Castina, the lead anchor, since before he started working at WSTA. Everyone knew that Mel was gorgeous, and boy, was she super on-camera. Off-camera, her personality was a bit of a tangled web, but Ethan loved her, and they had a decent relationship. However, she was a bit possessive, so I felt Ethan's pain because I knew that I had to decline his offer.

"Sorry, E. I've got dinner with the girls tonight. Tomorrow, maybe? Ps- I don't do coffee, but I love donuts."

Even though I was sad about letting Ethan down in his time of need, I was excited for my own plans. There is nothing like a good old sit down with the girls to make me feel rejuvenated.

My girls are my true lifeline. If it was not for this wonderful group of ladies, I would probably be ... you know, I don't really know where I would be; and in this case, I would hate to speculate. I met my crew so long ago that I feel like they are my extended family.

I made the all-important decision to extend my circle during my senior year of high school. I come from a small town in Ohio, and I knew that I would never be able to excel in my career field if I stayed there. I applied to UNC-Charlotte, and moved down here about three weeks before the start of the fall semester. My little sister, Hope, promised that she would come down and join me as soon as she graduated from high school, and she held true to that promise. Hope is still one of my roommates and ultimately my most trusted confidant.

But I had to wait two years for my little sister to arrive on the scene. In that time, I managed to meet the most incredible people in the world. I pledged the Philalethean Society my freshman year and found that making friends suddenly became very easy. Now, not only did I have a firm foundation of friends around me; now, I had sorority sisters. The group of ladies that I am planning on meeting very soon consists of all Phi girls and even though time has passed since college, we still made time for each other.

Before I had even thought to put my phone back in my purse, it vibrated again. I had another text message. I assumed that it was a response from Ethan, but technology plays tricks on us all. It was a text message from Nathan.

"Hey, Cherry, do you belong to the Physics club?" I read aloud. Nathan knew just how to make me smile. We both had a major obsession with the movie *The Breakfast Club*. I think he imagined that he was John Bender, the criminal, and I had this crazy fixation with Molly Ringwald, Claire, the princess. Nate had just told me the other day that he hated text messaging; so impersonal, he said. He is such a mystery.

I quickly text messaged back: "I also belong to the math club." I knew he would get a kick out of it. I was still smiling when I realized that I had wandered into the wrong part of town.

Patterson Furniture. Uh-oh. It is time to turn around and walk in the other direction. Oops, it's too late. His mother just spotted me. She waved politely and I smiled back as I glided my way out of sight. That was Drew's mother. She was still upset that we had split, but who could blame her? I was still upset too.

His mother had always had a special place for me. When I would go over for a visit, she and I would sit and talk for what seemed like hours. She had told Drew once that we were a very good-looking couple. In Mom-speak,

that meant that she couldn't wait for the two of us to get married and give her some "good-looking" grandchildren.

Mrs. Patterson had always had this weathered look about her. It was not that she was old; she just always looked tired. She looked especially tired today. A huge part of me wanted to hop into the store and say hello, but another part knew that it was not fair. I had never told my parents the story of our breakup and I don't think he would have told his either. It would not have been fair to me, or us.

It began during June of 2007. When I say "it," I mean "us." I knew I was not prepared for him or for love from the beginning. I had just said good-bye to my junior year of college and I had so many things to prepare for as my senior year was approaching. I had no intentions of falling in love. As a matter of fact, I had no desire to even associate with any of my coworkers. We were all of these different people, from so many different backgrounds, and I really wasn't that excited about spending my summer cooped up with all of them.

I was working at the Triam Steakhouse in a rapidly expanding town located right outside of Charlotte. The area was a major tourist spot, thanks to the amusement and water parks in the area. I spent numerous summers working next to the attractions in order to be near all of the tourists and all of the money they so generously donated to waitresses in that vicinity. I enjoyed this serving job much more than my other summer occupations for multiple reasons. I made quite a bit of money, the steakhouse was extremely meticulous when it came to business matters, and I liked being so busy all of the time.

Drew was not supposed to begin dating me. He was dating Naomi, or at least that is what Naomi thought. They had been hanging out quite a bit and she was all but falling over from happiness every day that she saw him at work. I liked listening to their ongoing soap opera-esque romance and I couldn't help but wonder if he even knew that she was crazy about him. As I said before, I wasn't really interested in making pals with these folks, but I was not really into being lonely either, so I took a chance and went out with the girls one night.

I was headed to this bar called Clink with my friend, Adria. Adria and I had started our waitress jobs at about the same time. We had spent some time making friends with one another and now I was fairly excited to be going out with some of our coworkers. Adria and I began gossiping about all of the others at work when we had this idea that we should call Drew and invite him to go out with us. I should not say that it was my idea. I was telling her that I thought he was adorable and she thought that if we invited him out with us, it would be a good icebreaker. In a woman's world, a good icebreaker is everything. If you don't know a guy very well, the best way to get to know him

is to invite him out in a big group. Then, if it doesn't work out you still have your buddies to take you home. A gal pal date is the equivalent of men bringing their wingmen along when they go out. It provides an airbag for you, and if nothing else, the girls can laugh about the date later.

I had Drew's number from earlier in the week. I had been out with another friend and we had run into each other. He asked for my number and I gave it to him. I mentioned before that I thought he was cute ... and come on-- who doesn't like a summer romance? He had called me that night and left a message. I was elated by the prospect of starting a new relationship.

Anyway, I let Adria call Drew because I was nervous. That might seem a little crazy because it was pretty clear he was interested, but I still was not willing to take a chance. Plus, Naomi would be furious. Even though they were not technically dating, if she heard I asked out Drew I would not want to see her again for at least three days.

Going to Clink was fun. I enjoyed the company of my female coworkers and decided that taking this job at Triam's had been the right thing to do for the summer. It was going to be more exciting than I had initially planned. Girls' night had been silly and full of laughter. Even though Drew had never showed up or returned Adria's call, I still felt like the night had been successful.

Just as we were about to clear out, Drew came bouncing through the door. He parked himself on a barstool near me and the girls passed judgmental looks around the table. They weren't quite sure what was going on and I really didn't know what to tell them. We all worked together so it wasn't that major of a deal that we were all together, but Drew had definitely cast a cloud over girls' night. I sipped my amaretto sour slowly, so as to avoid all suspicions.

As the bar was closing for the evening I noticed the crowd had thinned to me and Drew. He offered to drive me to my car and I remember thinking that I hoped he would kiss me. He drove me back to the steakhouse where I had parked and when he turned off the car, I knew that we would be sitting there at least a moment longer.

That moment lasted forever. We sat in his beat up white Toyota for over an hour. We looked at the stars, we shared stories, and we talked about all of the things that seem pertinent when you first begin dating. I remember staring at his face in the dark. Drew was handsome in a young sort of way. He was only about two years older than me, but his eyes held many stories.

When I say that he looked young, what I mean is that you could see how some of his features would eventually develop. I could imagine the person that Drew was going to be when he was older. The lines of his face,

while not yet quite developed, were cut faintly; as if they were just biding time before turning him into a distinguished man.

Perhaps the most captivating feature about Drew was his eyes. The person that I saw when I looked into those foretelling eyes was captivating. They were blue, of course. It always seems that all true loves have blue eyes. I know that isn't exactly true (nor is it scientific), but I recall thinking about his blue eyes and what that must mean. Drew had dark brown hair, which he wore slightly spiky. He had a broad forehead, sharp features, and a childlike grin. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with him, and could not wait to kiss him.

As I felt the evening draw to a close, I started to get out of the car, but felt my hand stumble for the door. I then turned and stared deeply into Drew's eyes. I tugged on the bottom of his shirt a little bit and before I could help myself, I was enveloped in one of the best kisses of my lifetime. I knew then that I was in love with him. It sounds so wildly odd, even now, but I knew. I just knew. I had never felt that same connection in a kiss ever. I had read about love-- true love-- but had never believed that anyone could find it in a kiss.

I pulled away from Drew purposely. I'd heard that when a woman leaves a man wanting more, it is likely that he will come back. I really thought that by ending that first kiss that I could have a repeat at a later date. I'm sorry to say that he and I never kissed like that ever again. But I only know that now thanks to retrospect.

He called the next day and we set up our first date. He was going to come to my house and pick me up. We were not entirely certain what we were going to do, but we knew we would start the date by watching *The Price is Right*. We had found that we were both addicted to Bob Barker, Plinko, and looking at all of the fabulous prizes available on the Showcase Showdown, so it seemed like a good idea for us to enjoy our favorite television game show together.

After all of the Bob Barker fun, I took him out to the reservoir and we had a picnic. I packed things like carrots, ham sandwiches, cake, and Sour Patch Kids. I find Sour Patch Kids to be a delightful icebreaker. (Remember what I said about icebreakers?) They are so important. Sour Patch Kids can help relax anyone, in any situation. It is monumental that everyone tries these fun-filled candies. A Sour Patch Kid is akin to a gummy bear; however, Sour Patches are twisted slightly because they are coated in tangy sugar. The guaranteed reaction that results from eating these treasures is the precise reason they can be used as icebreakers. If nothing else, the faces made will evoke laughter and there is no sound greater than shared laughter on a first date.

Every day after that became a holiday. We were enamored of one another. Even after everyone we worked

with, including Naomi, found out about our courting, we still were flying high. There was nothing that could separate the two of us. And it was so exciting just to be with him. We didn't need to talk. We didn't need to have sex. We just needed to be together. That is how summer romance is supposed to be, and I knew that. He knew that too, because when summer ended it became time to have "the talk."

Our talk was certainly the easiest talk I've ever had with any male regarding anything serious. He simply stated that even though I was returning to college for the fall semester that he still wanted to be with me. I agreed that I didn't want to be without him and that I would work to make our relationship something that would stay wonderful.

Our relationship worked because we wanted it to. We spoke every evening on the phone. I would even stop watching *Newlyweds: Sarah and Michael* to talk to him. When I am willing to sacrifice a television show for a man, then you know it is for real. He joined me every weekend on campus. Our relationship didn't really even seem like work. We spent time enjoying each other's company. But just when you think you have everything in perspective and exactly where you want it, that is the precise moment it all goes wrong.

This is when it all went awry. I really had not worried about our relationship. I trusted him. I loved him. We were a great couple. Then one day he called me with a dilemma. Adria had broken up with her boyfriend and needed to move out of their apartment immediately. Drew and Adria still worked with one another at Triam's and she asked him to help her move out of the apartment as quickly as possible. I felt horrible for poor Adria. She had moved to Santown to be with her boyfriend and she really had no place to go. I knew that it was necessary for her to leave her apartment as soon as possible, but I didn't want to sacrifice a weekend with my boyfriend. I offered to help with the moving process, but Drew insisted that I stay at school and have a great weekend.

I certainly missed him that weekend and was eager to see him the next. But, I didn't. Something else came up. He was busy again. That was when I began to have doubts about our relationship. When you are young and impressionable, it doesn't take much to doubt the person you love, but when you are forced to spend more than a week apart, your mind starts to wander. I wondered why Adria had not called me back. Not that I thought anything about it, but it was strange that my boyfriend helped her move and when I called to check on her she never returned my call. (Can you see where this story is going? If you can, you certainly are more astute than I was at the time.)

Shortly after all of the doubts subsided, I saw Drew again. Our chemistry was still intact. Our love glowed brighter than ever, but something was wrong; I had doubts. I had doubts about everything. If I really loved this guy,



how could I ever doubt him? What did that mean? How could he be satisfied without seeing me for a few weeks? I decided we would try to work it out when I went had a few days off for Thanksgiving break. That seemed like an excellent plan. If we could reproduce the magic that we had created that summer during break then our relationship might still contain possibilities.

Thanksgiving was not great. It wasn't even good. He had dinner with my family, as they had flown down for the occasion. It all seemed lovely. We were happy and holding hands, just like a couple of lovebirds. My family had met him previously and they decided that they loved Drew, so it was a pleasure to have him there. Following dinner, as we played board games, something happened. I don't quite recall exactly what it was that happened, but everything became different. Even my parents noticed something was amiss. We never argued, but he didn't spend the night. As a matter of fact, he refused to let me go home with him either. He promised the next night that we would hang out the next night and so I became content with that. I really hate fighting with people I care about, so I thought some time together was better than none.

I had planned to spend the entirety of the next day shopping with my parents. I drove separately so that after shopping I could go get Drew. He and I wanted to waste our evening cuddling, after he finished working. When I called him he told me that he was not finished at work yet. I said that was fine; I would come to work and hang out with some of our friends until his shift was done. He told me not to do that. I told him that was okay and that I would just go shopping for a bit longer, and then come get him later. He told me that he would call when he was off. After about a half- hour or so, the mall closed and I was still all alone without a call. I decided to go to Triam's and wait for him in the parking lot.

I pulled into the parking area and found his truck. He had bought a white pickup not even a month before. He was so proud of that machine that I laughed as I parked my little red Kia Rio (affectionately nicknamed "Molly" after my idol, Ms. Ringwald) next to it. He was one of those people that had waited his entire life to own a big white truck and now that he had one, he washed it and polished it nearly every day, even though it was snowing occasionally. As I turned my car off and opened my door, I saw that his truck was running. The truck was going, but the windows were all fogged. I couldn't even see if he was inside the vehicle, so I rapped on the window. The door swung open and Adria had her head tipped back deep in laughter. Drew was sitting in the driver's seat, laughing just as heartily. Adria offered to scoot over and let me slide in. She looked genuinely delighted by their private joke, and it seemed that she actually wanted me to join in on the merriment. I declined and looked quizzically at the both of

them.

Adria then seemed to get the hint and crawled out of the truck. I asked her what they were laughing about. She showed me this slip of paper. Apparently some new busboy had asked her out earlier in the evening and on the scrap of paper there was his number, scrawled. I did not know the new kid, so I inquired further. Her description of the busboy can only be described as odd.

She seemed to imply that the thought of going out with this individual was hilarious, but nothing about his description was funny. She said he was cute, had dark hair and big eyes. Still unimpressed by this interlude, I studied my friend Adria. What was she up to? I had never really thought of Adria “dating” guys. I knew she had been with her ex-boyfriend for such a long time that she had never really even been interested in checking out guys before. Adria was pretty, most certainly, but she wasn’t exactly approachable. She once described herself as abrasive and I thought that description was quite accurate. She had brown sleek hair that fell nearly to her waist. She had large brown eyes and a sprinkling of freckles. She was very tan and had a dainty body. She was usually funny, but for some reason today I didn’t find her story about Frank, the Busboy, lighthearted or even humorous. I was annoyed.

For the first time, I didn’t trust my friend. For the first time, I did not trust my boyfriend. I’d had serious reservations about Drew and his behavior for about a month now, but I had never stopped trusting him. What was different now? Why did I feel I could no longer trust these two individuals that had seemed so essential in my life? Drew and Adria in his stupid white truck: What were they really up to in there? Why was I not supposed to come to work? Why when I showed up to work was my boyfriend in his truck with another girl? It all seemed like a riddle. I asked Drew all of these questions and he said my suspicions were unfounded. He and Adria were friends. I was Adria’s friend. He was not interested in her, and likewise, she was not interested in him. I had nothing to worry about.

I really love that last sentence because it always seems to mean so much. When someone you love holds you close, looks deep into your eyes, and whispers, “You have nothing to worry about,” everything seems right with the world. You feel the warmth of their body, smell their clean skin, and wonder, “what was I even worried about?”

The interesting trick revolving around this sentence is that it is never meant to be comforting. It is meant to be misleading. Anytime anyone tells you that you have nothing to worry about, they are lying through their teeth. You have everything to worry about. Even worse, all of your suspicions are probably quite accurate and your

significant other cannot deal with telling you the truth, so they tell you what you want to hear and just hope that the problem will disappear.

Our problem did not disappear. It only got worse. Even when things were supposed to get better--they got worse. I flew back to Ohio over Christmas break, having made plans to spend time with Drew when I got back, but my plans never panned out the way they were supposed to. Our relationship reached its lowest point on Christmas Eve.

Drew went to Columbia to Christmas shop with his friends. He called and was so ecstatic. He couldn't wait to tell me about the gifts he had bought. He had found this wonderful scented candle for his mother. He found some tools for his dad and some baseball stuff for his younger brother. He talked about the candle so much that I was sure he had picked me up a gift very similar. Towards the end of our conversation I asked when we would exchange presents. He then decided to tell me that he had not bought me a present. I immediately began to cry. What a horrible thing to do to your girlfriend on Christmas Eve! He knew he had not bought me a present. He went shopping and bought a gift for his mother that he knew I would love and yet he purposely did not buy me anything. I had to hang up. I had to escape the feeling that this had left in my stomach.

When I finally answered the phone later the next day, I asked why he had not purchased anything for me. He said he wanted to take me shopping so that I could pick out what I wanted. This didn't sound like the worst thing in the world, but oddly enough, it was not comforting. It was not even what I wanted to hear. That is the funny thing about Christmas gifts. When you are giving them you feel so wonderful, but when someone you care about purposely does not buy you a gift, you feel betrayed. They must not care about you enough to buy you something if they don't do it to begin with, right? It could have been something, anything--but he had nothing. He had nothing for me. He was supposed to be in love with me, and yet could think of nothing that would serve as a gift.

As I contemplate this story, I hear myself coming off as shallow and unappreciative in the last description, so allow me to clarify. I loved my boyfriend and had spent a great quantity of time picking out Christmas gifts for him that I thought would make him happy. I did not spend hundreds of dollars on him, but I did spend many hours contemplating that which I wanted him to have. The part that hurt so much regarding his lack of gift was just that--it was the time and thought that mattered. I did not need jewelry or an expensive piece of electronic equipment. All I wanted was to know that he thought about me, the way that I thought about him. It was then that I began to wonder, is love only an illusion?

A few days later we arranged to meet so that I could give him his gifts. He had to work that day, so I was to meet him for lunch. I woke up early and dressed like a girl does when she thinks her clothes can persuade someone to stay in love with her. I had on a leather miniskirt and tan knee-high boots. I was wrapped in winter-chic attire that downplayed the fact that I was trying to show as much leg as possible. I suppose I was desperate. Or maybe I just knew that something was going to happen that day and if I was going to face the music, I might as well be dressed to sing the lead vocals.

I arrived at Drew's house a little after the time we arranged and I noticed his truck was not there. Only slightly thrown by this, I decided to call his cell phone. When I received no answer I just assumed he had gone out early that morning. Maybe he went to buy me flowers to make up for the argument we had regarding the Christmas gift. I did not know and I was giving him the benefit of the doubt. I left a message telling him I would be at the mall and he should just call me and let me know where to meet him. As I drove toward the shopping center, I spotted a truck that looked similar to Drew's. I pulled into the parking lot slowly and noticed that it was his vehicle. As I pulled my car into a spot near his truck, my heart began to beat erratically. Why was his truck parked in the Budget Inn parking lot?

I stalked around his car, peering in all corners, just to make certain that it belonged to him. This was a diversion. It was a waste of time. I knew the automobile belonged to Drew. Chalk it up to women's intuition, a hunch, or just his license plate cover. I had bought him an Ohio State Buckeye's license plate holder (as a joke) earlier in the year and sure enough, it was just sitting there, in the parking lot of this hell hole. To say I was nervous was an understatement. I tried to convince myself that there was a good reason that Drew's car was parked there. There had to be some reasonable explanation as to why he would be there. Maybe he was visiting a friend that worked there. Maybe his cousin had gone there for the evening. Maybe he had a fight with his roommate and thought it would be best to spend the evening at a motel. And of course, maybe he was there with someone.

My mind was whirling. My heart hurt. My eyes began to throb. My brain seemed to ache. I am not quite sure how my feet led me towards the entrance, but a matter of seconds later I was tromping through the door to the cheap escape for those that had something to hide. As I approached the desk, I noted the clerk could not have been much older than I was. She was a little pudgy with teased blonde hair. She had on a very round pair of glasses and if she told you that she was bored by her job, you would undoubtedly believe her.

I felt my knees begin to quiver and my stomach turn into knots as I came upon the desk. The clerk looked up from the tabloid magazine she was reading and gave me a scornful expression. "Yes?" she said.

"Yes, hello," I gulped. "I am looking for someone. Is Drew Patterson here?"

Her bored look plastered itself even further into the crevices of her face. "I don't know any Drew." Now, I know that Linda or Karen or Patricia or whatever her name was had no idea who Drew was. I also knew that she could not care less. But, she didn't seem to understand. I desperately needed help and she was the only person around who could provide it. All of the nervous energy that was boiling inside me began to soften into tears.

"Listen," I slapped my hand onto the sticky counter. "My boyfriend's name is Drew Patterson. That is his truck parked out there. I know he must be here somewhere, but I don't know where and I don't know why he is here. I am really sorry to bug you, but I need to know if he is staying here."

The bored look had eased itself off of her face. This was probably the most excitement this twenty-something year-old hotel clerk would ever see here and she was now eager to take part in the action.

"What did you say his name was again?" She began to dig through a pile of papers that were stacked under the desk. "Drew? Did you say Drew? Well, he didn't come in this morning, but just let me check over here." She turned her back to survey the room arrangements from the night before. I watched her scan about halfway down the rows, then suddenly her back stiffened. She straightened her spine and turned her head to look at me sideways. "I think I found something," she hissed. I wondered why she was whispering. Maybe she thought it was best if others did not hear her relaying customer information to me. Or maybe, she just felt sorry for me.

I can not quite imagine what the look on my face was conveying regarding my emotions. I know my insides were hurting so greatly I thought they would jump out of my skin, but I was trying my best to hold it together. I was in public, after all. She looked me up and down, grabbed a card from the arrangement and strode in my direction.

"Look," she said. "Your boyfriend is here. He checked in last night."

"Did he have anyone accompanying him?" I felt like I was screaming this statement, but it came out in a hoarse whisper. My heart jumped into my throat and my hand began to shake. I was not certain that I wanted the answer.

"I can't tell you that," she responded. I began to cry uncontrollably. The tears just spilled over. There was nothing I could do. I was so scared, so helpless, and so angry that my emotions got the best of me. She handed me a

Kleenex.

“Please don’t cry. I can’t tell you if he came in with someone else, because I wasn’t here. My shift just started a few hours ago and I have not seen your boyfriend. All I can tell you is that he is here and if you wait a little while his checkout will be soon. He should be coming along anytime now.” She seemed to think this information was helpful to me. She was sorely disillusioned.

“Wait a minute!” I screamed. “You are telling me that my boyfriend is in this hotel somewhere and you are not going to tell me where! If my boyfriend is cheating on me, I need to know now.” With this statement I slammed my palms onto the counter in order to provide emphasis.

“I’m really sorry, Miss. I understand what you need, but I am not allowed to tell you where he is.”

“If you don’t tell me where he is, I’m going to walk up and down this entire hallway until I find him.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I just can’t tell you his room number,” the clerk looked confused, a little frightened, and sad. She was sad for me.

“Fine,” I whispered. I was absolutely seething and I did not know what was coming next. If I was nasty to the poor clerk, then maybe something would seem clear. If only I could make some moment make sense. At least if I was able to treat her with disdain then I would be in control of something here.

I stomped my left foot, then my right foot. My feet were not comfortable in my boots, but that would not stop me. I began to march up and down the hallway.

“I am going to find him,” I said to myself. “He will not get away with this.”

“Drew!” I yelled. “Drew!” The clerk came striding from behind the counter. If she could have tackled me, I’m sure she would have done it. Instead, she grabbed my arm and looked at me with huge pleading eyes.

“Please, ma’am. Come back to the desk. I will see what I can do.” I nodded and all of the anger I felt diminished. I was crying again. The tears were free-flowing. I clung to the wall as if it were my only support in the whole world. The attendant handed me more tissues and waited as I calmed down.

“Okay. Here’s the deal,” she said. “We can call Drew’s room and if he answers, then I can tell you where his room is and you may go up there, if that is still what you want to do.” I nodded in agreement. It sounded like the only option that I had.

She dialed the number, waited to hear the dial tone, and then handed me the phone. It rang three times, and then I heard it. There he was. It was Drew’s voice on the other end of the line. In shock, I quickly placed the receiver

back in the cradle. She didn't even need to ask. She knew the answer. It was him and I needed to know how to get to him.

"He is in room 221. Go up the stairs and it is the first door when you exit. Please be careful." I shrugged and headed towards the staircase. "Be careful." The clerk had asked me to be careful. I didn't know what careful meant anymore. I could already feel my heart breaking, so there was no need to be careful with that.

My mind was in such a flurry as I raced up the stairs that I hardly remember what I was thinking. I hardly recall if I was breathing. When I got to room 221, I took a huge swallow. I would need to muster up all of my courage. I knew what I would find as soon as that door opened, and I wasn't really ready for it all. I was still in love with this creep.

I knocked on the door and jumped out of the way. I did not want him to see me in the peephole. If he was going to sneak around in a hotel room, then I was going to sneak around while finding him. No one answered the door, so I rapped my knuckles against the door again. When the door finally swung open, he was the one stunned into silence. My hands immediately heaved against the solid metal of the door and I slammed it wide open. I flew through the door and turned to push it shut behind me in one swift motion.

"What are you do ..." he started to say, but at that moment, I saw it. There she was, in the bed. Adria was there, sitting straight up in the king-size bed. She had a white sheet pulled up around her body so that all you could see was her white lacy camisole. One spaghetti strap had uselessly fallen down on her shoulder.

I once read in a book that Harry Houdini died performing a stunt. He used to do this thing where he would clench his stomach muscles and invite people to hit him in the abdomen as hard as they possibly could. He could withstand all of this force because for years he had worked on strengthening his abs. He would perform this trick for audiences and would encourage celebrities to attend his shows and give it their best shot.

One day before a performance, Houdini was getting prepared in his dressing room when some famous boxer came in. He had heard of Houdini's act and was eager to take the challenge. There was only one problem: Before the boxer punched Houdini in the gut, he did not warn him. Because he was unaware, Houdini had no time to flex his abs and he took a hard hit to his internal organs. Upon impact, Houdini's appendix ruptured. Being a no-nonsense macho man, Harry went on with the show, in spite of the pain. He died that evening trying to escape from the Water Torture Chamber. The effects the poison from his burst appendix had on the rest of his body caused a total shutdown and he was incapable of controlling his body any longer. I felt like Houdini at that moment. I had been hit

so hard and so unexpectedly that my body went into total shutdown. The magic had gotten away from me. It was now backfiring.

“I hate you!” I wailed. I slung my purse onto the ground. Drew quite literally backed himself into the corner.

He tried to speak, “Miss ...”

“Shut up!” I shrieked. The people in the other rooms must have thought I was a banshee.

“Let me ...” he began again.

“Shut up!” I yelled. I gazed at the girl I once considered my friend, now perched upright in the bed. She had not moved an inch. “I hate you,” I leered.

“Now, Missy,” Drew stepped from behind the doorway, “Just stop it right now.”

I turned on him, “Stop! You are telling me to stop!” Not only was my head spinning now, but my body was spinning around and around. I couldn’t decide who to yell at first. I couldn’t focus my eyes on any space. There was no safety anywhere in this room. If I looked at Drew, I would cry. If I looked at Adria, I would vomit. I decided to avoid looking at both altogether.

I screamed. I wheeled on him. “What do you think you were doing?” I looked at him with wild eyes. “No, don’t answer. You were cheating on me! Cheating on me! With her! How could you? I hate you. I hate you.” I delivered those last lines like I was reciting an ancient curse.

I whipped back around to face the bed. “You trash. How could you do this to me? You knew I loved him ... knew I loved him.” With the deliverance of that last line my body crumbled against the wall. As I sank into despair, my body slid to the ground. I began to wail. But before I could begin to wallow, I was rewired. I jumped to my feet and stomped up and down.

“Tell me you used a condom! Tell me you did! Where is the bathroom?” As I began to run past Drew into the restroom, I noticed what was playing on the television; Bob Barker and the fabulous *Price is Right*. It was nearly the final blow. I stormed into the restroom and threw the trash can onto the ground. Nothing came out but a couple of Q-tips. I slid down the wall of the bathroom and succumbed to my tears. “I can’t believe this. What is happening? How long has this been going on?” So many questions and so many emotions just came spilling out of my mouth. Drew knelt beside me and tried to brush back my hair.

“Don’t you even think about touching me! I hate you!” I squealed. My tears only began to fall harder as I



reiterated all of the questions that were coursing through my brain. Drew sat down on the floor next to me and tried again to comfort me through his touch. I backed against the bathtub and pulled myself up.

“I will kill her. Let me out of here. How could you?” As I started to lunge back out the bathroom door to get to Adria, Drew grabbed me.

“Please, stop. I love you. Nothing was happening here. You are overreacting.”

“What?” I whined. “Nothing is happening. I have nothing to worry about. I just found you in a hotel room with a friend of mine. You were clearly sharing a bed and you did not answer the door on the first knock. What were you doing?”

“Please, stop,” he commanded. “Let me explain.”

“Explain? Explain!” I howled, “You have nothing to explain.”

“Yes, I do,” he replied calmly.

“No, you don’t. It all seems pretty self-explanatory to me.”

“Missy, please. I love you,” he began to reach for me, but I backed away.

“You have two minutes,” I whispered.

“Thank you,” Drew began. “I was at home last night like I told you when we talked yesterday. I was planning to go to bed early so that I could get up early and get ready to see you. I was sitting in my living room watching television when my phone rang.”

“Liar,” I hissed. “I hate you. Why are you lying to me?” I just knew that he was lying. Why had I not seen through this act sooner?

“Stop,” he ordered. “I need to tell you this.” He stopped and searched my face. The room was completely silent as my teeth stopped chattering. I had been so worked up that I was now shaking involuntarily. My moment of weakness seemed to concede that I was willing to listen, so he rushed into the story.

“As I as saying,” he continued, “I was watching television when my phone rang. It was Adria. The friend she was staying with needed to go out of town and was not comfortable with her staying in the apartment all alone. She asked if she could stay on my couch for the evening and I told her I did not think it was a good idea. She convinced me that we were all friends and that you would understand. I told her I still didn’t think she should stay on my couch because of what my roommates would think. I told her I would drive her to a hotel and she could spend the night there. I picked her up at Triam’s and we drove here. When we got here the hotel clerk demanded that she

present an I.D. in order to get a room for the night. Adria did not have any I.D. so I volunteered mine. She then suggested that I stay the night because it was already late, and that way, I would be able to drive her back to work in the morning.”

“But where is her car?” I questioned.

“Her car is at Triam’s,” he replied. My eyes began to bug out of my head.

“So let me get this straight,” I said and cleared my throat. “You picked Adria up to drive her to a hotel and left her car at Triam’s. You had no intentions of spending the night in the same bed with this trash, but you did, so that way you could drive her back to her car in the morning. You did not sleep with her; you were just trying to be a good friend. Do you really expect me to believe any of this?”

“I don’t expect you to believe. I know you will believe it, because it is true. I love you. I do not love her. She is my friend. She is your friend. I would never sleep with her.”

“Oh yeah, sure. You would never sleep with her, but you would spend the night with her.”

“Please listen to me. Please trust me. Baby, please.” He leaned in and I collapsed into his arms. “Let me take you out of here. We need to talk more and we can’t stay here. Please come with me.” I allowed him to pull me to my feet. He nearly carried me to the door. Adria’s makeup and face wash were still scattered along the counter. It looked as though she had planned on staying there for a year or so. Drew began to gather her things off the counter.

“What do you think you are doing? Now you are picking up after that trick! What is going on?” I peered around the corner only to find that Adria had vanished. Drew grabbed his coat off the chair and hopped through the door. I remember taking one last look around the sleazy room. It was simply revolting.

I hung my head in sorrow as I walked down the stairs. I could feel the unhappiness enveloping every nerve in my body. I was nearly crawling down the stairs and knew that I was not prepared to face the world. As I strode past the counter I turned to see the clerk staring at me with big eyes. She knew. She knew it all. The pain was palpable, and she definitely knew the source of my tension.

That day Drew tried to convince me that I was the one for him. He told me that he would never cheat on me and that he loved me more that day than he had ever loved anyone. He wanted to be with me forever, just as we had planned and this did not change those feelings. These are things he wanted me to believe.

The next day, we broke up.

I remember thinking that day that I loved him so much. I recall sitting in my car and staring into his face

with only one thought in mind, "How can I let this wonderful man go?"

Now that it has been years since our separation I wonder, how did I ever fall in love with a man of that nature? How did I ever even consider it love? Maybe I just wanted to be in love so badly that ... I can't even finish that sentence. Single girls everywhere--stop yourselves before you even think that sentence. Because it is not true. I know that I loved Drew. No matter how badly a man hurts you; there is no reason to think that you were only in love with him because there was nobody else. There is always somebody else. It is just a matter of finding him.

Drew, after all, was not my first love, but I did care about him greatly. Just because he hurt me it doesn't mean I never loved him or I never should have loved him. It just means that he was there; he and I coexisted for awhile. We were important to each other for a brief moment of time. He taught me a valuable lesson about "magic." He had also taught me a valuable lesson about friends.

What is the old saying? "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer"? I totally disagree. I say, "Keep your friends close, especially if they have the tendency to flirt with your boyfriend."

Approximately a month after the hotel fiasco, I found out that Drew and Adria were together. They had begun officially dating about two days after he and I had broken up. Apparently they had been seeing each other casually during the end of our relationship, but had tried to keep their mounting feelings for each other a secret.

The thing that hurt the most was when I heard that they were happy. I could deal with the lies. I could deal with the secrets and the deceit. What I couldn't deal with was his happiness. Why did he get to treat me like dirt, then profit from the affair? I could not understand it. Our mutual friends were sad to report that Drew seemed happier with Adria than he had ever been. I guess I should have known better.

"Sure as shit you should have known better."

"Are you still telling that tired story? You only have license to fly that story once more during this lifetime."

My friends were there, right on time ... as always.