

*Young Love*

As I sit here on your old, worn-down couch in your family living room, I can feel the cool and cracked brown leather sticking to my skin. I grip my toes into the shaggy green carpet that is seemingly eternally covered in clumps of blonde dog hair, courtesy of Milo, your golden retriever. He is sleeping in the corner of the room, unbothered. The relentless scent of wet dog and day-old Chinese take-out floats around the room, and it is oddly comforting. I stare at the mantle resting above the fireplace across from me and gaze at the photos of you and your parents, you and your older sister, and a portrait of you alone, outlined by a golden frame right in the center of the mantle for everyone to admire. Your parents really are proud of you. They have no reason not to be. In their eyes, you are perfection.

I have been here countless times before. It all looks the same as it has for the past two years and yet, it feels entirely different now. This used to be a place where I was welcome, where I would come to for support and solace. In this instance, it is a place that I wish I could erase from my memory forever. It is cold and dark; the curtains are drawn with only the slightest bit of light bleeding through the blinds, and it is disconcertingly quiet. I think you closed them so nobody walking past the window could see us.

I can hear you sniffing softly in the bathroom around the corner. You knew exactly why I was here, and you were preparing to put your act on. That might be why when you answered the door, your face instantly dropped, and your puppy dog eyes were already full of tears. When I asked if I could come in, all you did was nod and step to the side. After several minutes of me sitting alone on the couch, you slip around the corner and stand in the small doorway between

me and your front entrance. Your eyes are puffy and inflamed, your face is shiny from the tears falling down your cheeks...such a sad face. You were trying to turn yourself into the victim. You were trying to make me feel sorry. I look over at you, then back at the couch, as a gesture for you to sit next to me. At least then we would be on the same level. The last thing I wanted was your six-foot frame towering over me. Slowly you start to walk over to me, dragging your feet across the floor. As you sit down, you begin putting your hands under your thighs and stare at the ground the entire time.

I watch you for a moment, speculating if what I am about to say is the right thing...or if I am about to make a mistake. I take a sharp breath in and hold it for a moment. I was uncertain if I was going to be able to do it. I finally manage to get the words out.

“We’re done.” I sigh through my teeth. I clench my jaw to keep myself from saying anything else. I feel my cheeks rapidly turn warm and my chin begins to tremble ever so slightly.

Right away, I want to take it back. I want to say that I forgive you for everything, I want to tell you that we can figure things out, but the most unbearable thing I want to tell you is that I still love you. I want to say all these things, but I know that if I do you will continue to hurt me again and again. You pull your hands out from under your thighs and cover your face with them. Your body begins shaking and you erupt into tears all over again. My instinct is to reach out and touch you, comfort you somehow, but I hold myself back. You get up off the couch and promptly walk around the corner back into the bathroom, leaving me alone in the room. I just sent you into a full-blown panic attack with two little words. I did not want this. I hear your breathing become more and more erratic as you desperately gasp for air.

Shifting my body awkwardly on the couch, I pull my legs up to my chest and hold on tightly, praying you are not doing anything drastic in that bathroom. You have threatened to do terrible things several times before. I remember you telling me about how you're clinically depressed and that you battle with anxiety. I just thought that these things were unmanageable and that you needed someone to be there for you. What I did not know was that over time you began to use your struggles to your benefit. All I can think about as I listen to you sobbing in the bathroom is that you could pull a stunt on me, and normally I would cave. This could be one huge final attempt to keep me here and under your influence, prolonging this poisonous cycle we have both created. I close my eyes and listen to your sniveling. When we met two years ago, I never imagined that we would be here now. Me, sitting alone in your living room feeling numb and lost, and you sitting on your cold bathroom floor, feeling sorry for yourself.

Several minutes go by before you come back around the corner with your face patchy, red, and puffy, with tears dotting the collar of your light-grey button up shirt. A shirt you used to wear on our nights out, because you knew I loved the way it looked on you. You stand in the doorway holding onto the wooden frame with your forearm, leaning into it to hold yourself up.

"Can you talk to me?" I say, in a moment of vulnerability. I know that talking will only make this tougher, but a small part of me thinks that maybe you will say the right things. Part of me thinks that if I let you explain yourself or feed me more apologies, the outcome might be different. All I want is for you to tell me the truth. Although, I would be a sucker to expect the truth out of you. You were always so good at lying. So good in fact, that I never noticed. You mastered the art of covering your lies with fake affection, a thick sugar-coat of manipulation followed by caresses and compliments that I would naively take in. I did not know any better.

I am at your house today because I received an unexpected phone call the night before.

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I was sitting in my bedroom hours after having just spent the night out with you. You picked me up in your shiny, silver mini cooper and we drove around town, singing at the top of our lungs without a care in the world. We got food from a cheap Chinese take-out place outside my neighborhood, then drove over to your house to watch movies, in that same living room. Although, when you said you wanted to watch movies, you never really meant that. I am sitting at my vanity wiping off my faded makeup when my phone begins vibrating, stuck underneath my leg. The caller ID said Declan, one of my closest friends. He doesn't normally call me so randomly, so his call took me by surprise.

"Hey!" I answer.

"Hey Linds... I know this is weird, but I wanted to call you because I heard something about Evan that I think you should know. I'm not really sure if it's even true or not but..."

I furrow my eyebrows and get up from sitting at my desk to sit on the edge of my bed. "Okay, go ahead and tell me." I said, not expecting the worst.

"So, I heard that he hooked up with Sydney, a couple days ago. Sydney told Katie about it, and then Katie told me, and my loyalty lies with you, obviously...and I really did not want to be the one to tell you, but I think you deserve to know. I'm sorry."

I exhale into the phone, my breath starting to get shaky. I feel my cheeks flush and my throat get tighter. As I attempt to grasp what I had just heard, my mind spirals. I go back and forth between telling myself that you would never do this to me and reminding myself that I do have some reasons to believe it.

The “Katie” that Declan mentioned was the type of girl who was always trying to find a way to start drama. I would never trust her word alone. On the other hand, I trust Declan with my whole heart, and this is what made me realize that this may not just be a rumor. I would have to find out myself.

“Oh...okay, well, thank you for telling me, um... you know what, I will call you back in a minute, I’m going to call him really quick.” I hang up on Declan and set my phone down on the pillow next to me. I still refused to believe it. I gazed at the wall in front of me and contemplated not picking my phone back up. I did not know how I should even go about addressing you or if I should just let it go, sleep it off, turn it into a bad dream. Several agonizing minutes go by before I pick my phone up and open my contacts list. I stare at your name, then hover my finger over the dial symbol. I press it. I want to throw up. I hold onto my stomach with my left hand. Confrontation was never my strong suit. The phone rings, and rings, and rings. I close my eyes.

“Hey babe, what’s up?” you answer, with such a sweet tone of voice.

“Hey, so I heard you hooked up with Sydney?” I say, with a bleak tone I could not help but let sneak out. I want to keep my composure, but I struggle as I feel my face get hotter and my eyes begin to well up with tears.

There is silence. Static.

“What? I don’t...Lindsey, who told you that?” You stammer.

“It doesn’t matter who told me, I’m not throwing anyone under a bus. This is about you and me. Please don’t lie to me...did you fuck her?” I ask.

“Okay look, that’s not what happened...and it wasn’t my fault... I never initiated anything...plus I was high...but seriously who even told you that...that’s not even what happened...what the fuck...Lindsey, listen to me, I...” You shower me with excuse after excuse, as your tone shifts from stern and defensive to just a series of helpless whimpers. I hang up the phone in the middle of your rambling, I stopped listening and my hands are still shaking. I call Declan back.

“Hey,” my voice cracks, “I just called him, and he didn’t deny it. Thank you for telling me. I needed to know.” I hear him let out a heavy sigh on the other end of the phone as I begin hysterically sobbing into my pillow. “I’m really sorry Lindsey.”

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Now, here I am, on your couch. After your self-induced panic attack, I ask you to talk to me. You tentatively lean away from the doorway and sit down on the couch next to me again, only this time you sit across the couch, as far away from me as possible. You glance over at me and wipe your runny nose with your hand.

“I’m...I’m really sorry Lindsey. I just need you to know that... I still love you...and I think if you would let me fix this, we can move past it. You are seriously my best friend and I don’t want to lose you just because I made a stupid mistake.” You whine and gasp for air between words.

“I’m not going to make excuses because I know you hate them... I have fucked up a lot but in the grand scheme, it’s all been small things and me trying to hide it makes everything look way worse...I would never intentionally hurt you...I don’t know what else to say... I am just hoping for your forgiveness.” You are looking at me with your droopy and heartbreaking ocean-

blue eyes. You blink twice, forcing a teardrop down your cheek. I know it is all a show, but my heart aches and I wish this were all a bad dream.

I had already forgiven you countless times before. I forgave you when I found out you were taking considerable amounts of hard drugs, including acid and other unknown substances from a capricious guy who swore it would make you feel phenomenal. I found out about that from someone else, too. I forgave you when your ex came to “visit” and you said you didn’t think you needed to tell me because it “wasn’t a big deal” and I should just trust you. Later I found out that you actually invited her to come, she didn’t just happen to be in town. I let you call me in the middle of the night to listen to you have a panic attack. You would tell me how much you hate yourself and that you needed to know right then that I loved you and that I would never leave you, and if I ever did leave, that you would kill yourself. I forgave you when I stumbled across the accounts of numerous naked women whom you followed on social media because “you were horny, it wasn’t your fault, it’s an addiction and you couldn’t help it, I wouldn’t understand.” The thing that I hate the most is that I let you take advantage of my body and my heart when it was convenient for you, because you told me you loved me. Is this love?

I have been here for over an hour now. The soft spot I have for you keeps me stuck here, not letting me leave yet. I know I should leave, but something about walking away from this thing that has become entirely too comfortable for entirely too long terrifies me so much more than choosing to stay. You move yourself closer to me. I cross my legs away from you.

“You make no sense; you’re not making sense...I just don’t understand why...why...” My voice cracks as my walls begin to crumble down in front of me.

“I was too fucked up to realize what I was doing... it didn’t mean anything. Linds... I love you. Please. I don’t want to lose you.” You start to lean in closer to me. I grab the pillow resting behind me and place it on my lap as a barrier between us. I know that if I let you put your hands on me, all I will want to do is let you.

“Just give us a day. Let us just have a day of space and then we can talk about this again, babe. I promise I will never ever do anything to hurt you ever again. I love you.” You lilt these words to me, attempting to sway me. Now, you seem so well composed, as if you were not just screaming on the bathroom floor just minutes ago. It has worked before. I start to believe that maybe you are being sincere.

No.

I was making excuses for you. God knows you already spewed enough excuses of your own.

“I have to go now.” I mutter under my breath. I glance at the clock above your portrait on the mantle. It had been hours at this point, the sun had set already. I place the pillow I was clutching on my lap back on the couch and make my way towards the front door. I grip my car keys in my left hand and as I grasp the door handle, I hesitate for a moment. I feel you standing behind me. You are so close that I can feel the warmth radiating off your body. I hold my breath.

“Wait, Linds...can I kiss you, just one last time?” You whisper, as you slide your left hand across my waist to pull me into you. Chills crawl up and down my spine and I feel like I might vomit. I whip your hand off me and turn around to face you, tilting my head up to look at your face. As I look into your eyes, all I can think of is the portrait of you in your living room. A stagnant and unadulterated glimpse of my best friend and the person I loved for so long. You



gaze at my eyes, then my lips, then back at my eyes. You know that I always give in to you. Why would this time be any different?

You were broken and I was young and in love. Sometimes, I wish we never met. Maybe then, I would be able to let someone else show me what real love feels like.