

A close-up, artistic photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her nose and lips. She has dark hair and is wearing a necklace with a large, ornate cross pendant. The lighting is soft and dramatic, highlighting the texture of her skin and the details of the jewelry.

FAKING

FAITH

JOSIE
BLOSS

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ONE

School was the same sort of hell every day.

I went to homeroom and everyone ignored me. I went through my morning classes, everyone ignored me. I ate my lunch alone in a library study carrel (secretly, so the librarian wouldn't yell at me about getting crumbs in the keyboard), and tried to do homework. Afternoon classes, more of the same. Ignored.

And then home. Where I was also mostly ignored. In some grim way, I sort of appreciated the consistency.

People still hissed “psycho slut” or “crazy bitch” at me in the hallways, of course. It happened less often as the months wore on, but still enough to make me feel a little insane and perpetually paranoid as I walked past groups of people on my solitary way to class. But really, most of my day was ghostly and quiet.

It used to be different. I used to be busy—with dance classes and piano lessons and other activities typical of an over-scheduled, high-achieving suburban Chicago high school student.

And I used to have a couple of kickass best friends—Kelsey and Amanda. The kind of friends who would stay on the phone with me until midnight, endlessly analyzing the nuances of a conversation with some crush. Who would lend me shirts and borrow my shoes and offer blunt opinions on my hair. Who had known all my secrets since fourth grade. Who would walk with me, arms linked, through the school halls between classes.

Kelsey and Amanda and I had been a solid mass, an indivisible force to be reckoned with. Even if we weren't part of the most popular crowd, we could hold our own in the high school hierarchy. If you messed with one of us, you messed with all of us. I didn't even know how great I had it.

Because now I was alone at the bottom, and my old friends ignored me like everyone else. Except for when I was being taunted, I might as well not have existed. For anyone, anywhere.

The thing is, I deserved it. Even though I still couldn't admit it out loud, I knew for certain that I deserved everything that came to me. I had been so stupid.

...

Blake Compton hit on me at a party last September.

At first, I'd been sure it was a joke.

Blake was one of those unattainable hot guys who seem to glide through the world like they run the place, oozing privilege and self-satisfaction out of every pore. He was the guy who nearly every girl lusted after, even the girls who rolled their eyes and claimed his player reputation made him ugly. He knew just how to work his charm and make anyone crumble to his will with one raised dark eyebrow or half a lazy smile. Blake could make people powerless.

As a girl with a serious appreciation for the male form, I'd adored Blake Compton from afar since freshman year. I'd typed a series of humiliating entries in my journal about the exact glossy brown shade of his perfectly messy hair and the precise gold of his perpetually tanned skin. I'd even written a terrible poem about the shape of his lips and that little quirk in the corner of his mouth that made me feel shivery in the knees whenever I caught sight of him in the hallways.

But I didn't have any illusions that I'd ever have a chance with him or anything.

I thought I was probably everyday-pretty and smart enough to get by okay in the world, but boys like Blake are attracted to the sparkliest girls. The gorgeous girls who also glide through the world like they own the place. And I was wholly resigned to the fact that I'd always be admiring the Blake Comptons of the universe from across the room where I belonged.

It was just the order of things.

But then suddenly there he was, in the flesh, standing right next to me at Caitlin Merriweather's back-to-school party. Quirking his mouth. At me. And

everything changed.

“Dylan, right?” he said.

I nodded dumbly, resisting the urge to glance around to see if this was a prank. Blake Compton knew who I was?

“Hey, you know, I always thought that was a cool name. Can I get you another drink or three?” was all he had to say, with that lazy, heart-stopping smile.

By the end of the night I was drunker than I’d ever been in my life, and had been easily persuaded to accompany Blake to one of the bedrooms upstairs to “spend some time alone.” Kelsey and Amanda texted me a half million times from downstairs, but I ignored my vibrating phone. This was bliss, heaven. A cute boy, *the* cute boy, with his tongue in my ear.

Okay, so he really wasn’t the best kisser in the whole world, and he was a lot more handsy than I was totally comfortable with, but he was *Blake Compton*. He smelled like expensive spicy cologne and confidence.

As he kissed me, I felt like I drifted out of my body and hovered somewhere up near the ceiling, watching the two of us on the bed below. I couldn’t believe it was happening to me.

Guys in general had always made me kind of nervous and marble-mouthed, and I felt like a jackass every time I tried to flirt. At that point, I’d only kissed two boys at parties, mostly just to get the experience out of the way. Meanwhile, Amanda and Kelsey, who seemed to have some secret knowledge that I’d missed out on, had already racked up five boyfriends between them. They were just barely virgins anymore, and both knew far more than I did about the male species.

So I guess I expected them to be happy for me as we started to hike the mile back to my house for the planned post-party sleepover. Or at least good-naturedly teasing about Blake choosing me out of the masses.

“He said that we should hang out,” I said, still tipsy on my heels and giddy with my good luck. “Like a date ... a real date! I mean, I know he has a reputation for being a player, but he said he really likes me and he sounded so ... *real*.”

Some small part of me realized I was being an idiot. My friends obviously felt this too, and they both gave me dubious looks that I chose to ignore.

I continued babbling. “And you guys were totally right about this shirt! He said I looked really hot in it.”

I glanced down to admire the gauzy piece of form-fitting fabric that Amanda had lent to me earlier in the night. It was the first time in my life I’d ever felt cuter than my friends, who I’d always secretly thought were much more stylish and magazine-pretty than me.

Not that they made me feel that way on purpose. It was just the way things were.

“Dude, Dylan,” said Kelsey, who was short, feisty, and prided herself on never sugarcoating a damn thing. “Everyone knows Blake’s an ass. He goes through girls like toilet paper. He’s just going to use you.”

“What?” I said. “You’re crazy.”

“No, for serious, we’re not just saying that,” said Amanda, in a surprisingly firm tone considering she was one of those sweet-voiced girls who seems to talk solely in question marks. She was compulsively wrapping her long brown hair around her index finger like she always did when she was upset. “Blake is totally bad news. You know that, right?”

I stopped walking and blinked at them in disbelief.

“What, you don’t think someone like him would want to be with me?” I said, my hands on my hips. “I’m not good enough or something? Is that it? Jealous much?”

In hindsight, I’d come to realize this was not my best moment. In fact, it was possibly the dictionary definition of my worst moment ever. The moment I’d later turn over and over in my mind while cringing and wishing like hell for a time machine so I could go back and slap myself.

Kelsey and Amanda gaped at me, and then Kelsey stormed back toward the party with a muttered “*dumbass.*”

“No one said that you weren’t good enough! Look, Dylan, we just want you to be careful because we love you,” Amanda said, glancing after Kelsey with a frown. “I mean, you’ve never hooked up with a guy like him before, and—”

“And what?” I spat back. “You think I don’t know what I’m doing?”

Amanda looked down at the ground and shrugged. It was plain unavoidable fact that I was the least experienced of the three of us, which was something that

I'd readily admit to on a normal day.

But on that night, I was drunk and defensive and didn't see why anyone had to throw my innocence in my face. Just because the hottest guy in the school happened to decide that he liked me instead of one of them? Just because neither of them were currently hooking up with anyone? Just because I was the one getting some attention, like that was the craziest thing that could ever happen?

"When I need your advice, I'll ask for it!" I said, crossing my arms tightly over my chest, irrational anger building in my throat at the sight of Amanda's stricken face.

"Dylan—"

"I'm sick of being your tag-along ugly friend! You just keep me around to feel better about yourselves," I burst out, then turned my back on Amanda's shocked expression. "Just go. Go back to the party and leave me alone. You guys suck."

Even as I said it, I knew I was wrong. And I hated myself.

"But Dylan ... " I heard Amanda say tearfully as I stalked away toward my house.

"Just let her go," snapped Kelsey from down the street, where she'd been watching us. "She's out of her mind."

And that was the last time I talked to either of them. I was That Girl who let a stupid guy get between her and her best friends.

TWO

Blake and I lasted for two months.

BAt the beginning, it was awesome. For the first time in my life, I was a tangential member of the truly popular crowd. I wasn't actual friends with anyone else in that circle, but as Blake's girlfriend I got to sit at the big kids' table and was invited to the smaller and more exclusive drunken gatherings. Even though the girls in the group barely tolerated my sudden presence and sometimes said catty things right to my face, at least I wasn't outright ignored.

And then Blake would twine his arm around my waist and put his face in my hair as we walked through the crowded halls, and it was perfection. I felt desired and whole by his side, like I had found my one true place in the world and that was all that mattered.

Everything else in my life swiftly fell away. I quit my dance classes, which I had been taking since I was five. I stopped showing up to piano lessons. National Honor Society meetings and volunteering seemed like a waste of time now that I had a boyfriend to make out with after school. My grades slowly started sinking. I got my first-ever C on an English essay.

"Nerd," Blake said when I told him.

My parents fought me for a while, harping on discipline and my future and college applications in that clueless, tone-deaf way old people have. But they were both partners at a big law firm in the city and it's not like they had time to monitor exactly what I was doing every minute of the day. Eventually, with huge sighs of deep disappointment, they stopped bringing it up. I was happily lost in Blake.

Whenever I saw Kelsey or Amanda in the hall, I looked pointedly away and pretended like they didn't exist.

Of course, they didn't try to talk to me either. I sometimes caught Amanda giving me one of her wide-eyed, wounded-animal looks, but she never actually tried to talk to me. And I got the distinct impression that Kelsey wouldn't even stop to spit on me if I were on fire.

Sometimes I wished we could all just get over it and be friends again, because deep down, below my pride and hurt feelings and Blake bliss, I really missed them. And I had questions. I didn't realize relationships could move as fast as mine and Blake's seemed to be moving. But every time I thought seriously about trying to make up with them and admit I'd been irrational, I got pissed off at what they'd said the night of the party. At how unsupportive and doubtful and dismissive they'd been.

And shouldn't my awesomely hot and devoted boyfriend be enough for me? Hadn't he proven that he wasn't just using me, that this was something good and real?

My friends had been wrong, and they were still refusing to admit to it.

"You don't need those jealous bitches," Blake said after I told him the story, wrapping my ponytail around his wrist and pulling gently. "You're better off without them anyway."

And I'd agreed.

Blake was my first everything.

After we had been dating for only two weeks, he yanked me close and told me he couldn't stand it anymore, that it was cruel and unusual punishment to make him wait. He wanted to make love to me so bad it physically hurt. That's exactly what he said—"make love." It sounded lovely and romantic to me. Just like what a first time should be.

And I was flattered and thrilled, and tried to pretend I wasn't freaked out by the fact that it had only been a few weeks since he'd first talked to me. I decided that I *must* love him, because I wanted him too. It had to be love, right? This whirlwind feeling of wanting to be as close to him as possible? Wanting to make him happy in any way that I could?

So he snuck into my room—well, technically, he just walked into it on a night when both my parents were working late—with a bottle of vodka and a condom from his wallet.

It was awkward and kind of painful and much quicker than I thought it would be. It didn't feel particularly like love. More like something perfunctory and unexciting and biological.

Though he seemed to enjoy it enough.

After Blake kissed my cheek and left, I curled up in my bed and stared at my phone, which was sitting on the pillow next to me. I wished more than anything I could talk to someone about what had happened and get some perspective on my experience. But there wasn't one person in the whole world I felt like I could call.

One weekend when Blake was in Colorado skiing with his brother, he drunk-dialed me. He was flirting hard and things got a little heated up. Eventually he started trying to talk me into taking a couple of topless pictures of myself with my webcam and emailing them to his phone. And I wanted him to love me so much that I did it, even though I felt ridiculous and kind of gross.

It took me fifteen attempts to get the angle right.

"You'd never share these with anyone, right?" I said, hesitating for a moment before I hit send. "I mean, this is just between us?"

" 'Course! Who do you think I am?" he said, a smile in his slurred voice. "Now I'll never be away from you, baby. You're so good to me."

Obviously, I should have known.

...

My relationship with Blake ended horrifically, of course, as anyone other than me could have predicted.

In November, Blake started acting chilly and distant. He wouldn't return my texts for hours and mostly ignored me at lunch, angling away at the cafeteria table so I'd have to make conversation with the girls who didn't like me. He'd give me improbable excuses about why he couldn't come over to my house, even on the opportune nights when both my parents were gone. He stopped walking with me through the halls.

I ignored the ache in my stomach and excused Blake's behavior away for as long as possible. It was just a weird boy phase, I rationalized, trying not to give in to the panic. He'd get over whatever his problem was and things would go

back to how they were before. We'd date until we graduated, and then go to the same college and get married when we were twenty-four before he started business school, and live happily ever after.

And then one day after school, I caught Blake making out with Caitlin Merriweather up against his Range Rover.

He always gave me a ride home, so clearly he'd meant for me to find them together. He just didn't care anymore.

I stopped for a moment, watching how his hand moved up her arm to cup her shoulder. Observing, in a distant and almost academic sort of way, how his mouth moved over her lips in a gross swallowing motion that reminded me of a snake devouring its prey. I idly wondered if it looked ugly like that when we kissed.

When we used to kiss ... when I used to have a boyfriend ...

Then my vision started throbbing red, like every cell in my body was about to explode. I completely lost my sanity right on the spot.

"You cheating asshole!" I'd screamed, and they stopped kissing and looked at me. I threw my messenger bag at his head, and Caitlin shrieked like a little girl. Blake blocked my bag with his forearm and broke away from her.

"Damn, Dylan, chill out," Blake started to say, rolling his eyes, his palms up as if I were a diseased wild animal. People in the parking lot were beginning to stop and watch the drama, their mouths hanging open.

"Excuse me? I will definitely *not* chill out! How could you do this to me?"

"Dylan ... come on, be reasonable. We had a good run, right? It was never going to last, you knew that."

In response, I went around to open the back of Blake's Range Rover, where I knew he kept his golf clubs, and yanked out his nine iron. I gripped it firmly and turned to face him. The crowd gasped appreciatively. I dimly registered that a kid from my physics class was holding up his phone, recording the whole thing.

"Hey ... uh, hey, what the hell are you doing?" Blake was actually smiling, like he thought it was a big joke. No girl had ever dared touch his sacred golf clubs in anger.

I looked him in his beautiful eyes, rage filling me to the brim. My friends had been right. I was an idiot. Of course he'd betray me like this after everything I'd

so easily given to him. My time, my life, my *body*.

My hands quivered around the golf club, and for a moment, I felt powerful.

“I’m doing this, you asshole!”

Without another thought, I bashed off his side-view mirror. Then I started smashing away at the windshield with every ounce of strength, watching the glass spiderweb, until Blake ripped the club out of my hands and shoved me away. As I stood there gasping for breath, already starting to regret what I’d just done, Blake slowly walked up to me. He put his face so close to mine, it almost seemed like he was going to kiss me on the mouth.

“I only hung around with you because I knew you’d put out, you dumb little insecure bitch,” he told me in a low voice, somehow both amused and furious. “You’re pathetic. I’ll end you.”

Then he turned, put his arm around Caitlin, and walked away.

The next day, everyone who mattered at school had the topless webcam pictures of me in their inboxes from an anonymous email address. The email also contained a link to a YouTube video of me swinging at the car with the golf club. *Dylan Mahoney = CRAAAZY SLUT* was in the subject line.

I knew all that because it was forwarded on to me by several thoughtful acquaintances from Blake’s lunch table.

At which point I fetal-positioned up in bed and prayed not to wake up.

I wasn’t there to witness much of the immediate aftermath because I got an immediate five-day suspension for the busted car—a punishment I’d expected. My parents, who both managed to take the morning off work to come deal with my screw-up, were able to convince Blake’s screaming, red-faced father not to press charges.

But what really burned was getting called back into school two days later to get an additional suspension for the pictures.

My parents took another morning off and argued the sentence, but the administration at my school wanted to make an example of someone. “Sexting,” as all the cable news shows breathlessly called it, was a trend the school district wanted to make a show of punishing, whatever the context. However unfair.

“But I only sent them to one person,” I said to the vice principal, beyond tears in my humiliation. “I didn’t *mean* for anyone else to see them. They were private

pictures for my boyfriend!”

I looked desperately around the room for support, but my parents wouldn't even meet my glance. Dad sat with his hand covering his eyes, like he was denying what was happening right in front of him.

“Blake Compton says he lost his phone a few weeks ago and doesn't know anything about the pictures being disseminated. And unfortunately, there's no way to prove he had anything to do with it,” the vice principal said, shaking his head. “Look, Dylan, you should just hope you don't get charged with distribution of child pornography, like some counties are doing. It doesn't matter what your intent was. You created and sent pictures of an underage girl. That's a felony.”

I huddled back in my chair, wrapped my arms around myself, and shuddered. “But *I'm* the underage girl.”

“It doesn't matter.”

All anyone could do was shrug and frown at me like I was a lost cause.

My parents took me home, yelled at me for likely ruining my chances at a good college, and grounded me for the rest of the school year. Mom was particularly livid, like I had done this just to embarrass her personally.

“I can't believe you were so stupid!” she said, pacing the living room floor, almost in tears. “We raised you to be smarter and stronger than that. Did you even stop to think for a second about what you were doing? Debasing yourself like that for some *boy*? I don't even know who you are anymore. This isn't something *my* daughter would do.”

I could have screamed back at her, asking where she and Dad had been the past few months and why they hadn't ever asked if I was dating someone, or if they could meet Blake, or anything else about my life other than details about grades and application fodder.

But by that point, I didn't really care enough to fight. I couldn't even muster up the will to feel anything but shame. Nothing could be worse than what had already happened, how I'd acted, what everyone had *seen*.

For two weeks, I did nothing but lie in bed and read Harry Potter books, blocking out the rest of the world and living in as much denial as possible.

But I still heard that the story of my misfortune was picked up by a couple of

Chicago news outlets. My name wasn't officially mentioned, of course, but there was no hiding. Every kid in school, every parent, every teacher, everyone I knew in the whole world was aware that the sexter who'd taken a golf club to her boyfriend's car was me. A simple Google search connected my name to the photos and the YouTube clip of me bashing in Blake's windshield. The story spread throughout the Internet and onto the cruelest websites as the newest unfortunate thing to point at and laugh at.

My first day back at school after the suspension was the worst day of my life.

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