

PLAYLIST

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Who's the strongest player?

PLAYLIST

KARI-JADE BRENNAN

PLAYLIST

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CONTACT: karijadebrennan.com

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Charlotte & Toby

Charlotte

Saturday

**

Charlotte stares at her Blackberry dormant on the kitchen counter.

Last night he promised to call at 5.30 pm.

It's now 5.47 pm.

Fleeting thoughts invade her head space, each deliberation captures further confusion, hopelessness.

I hope everything's okay.

His phone might be flat.

Maybe he has a playlist.

Preoccupied, Charlotte bites her nails. She paces back and forth before returning to the counter. The Blackberry screen reads 5.48 pm.

He's stuck at work.

Maybe he's stuck on the phone to his mum.

Or else he's stuck in the supermarket queue.

Should I call him?

Traffic might be chaotic, and he doesn't have his hands-free kit.

Maybe his mate's car broke down needing his help.

Charlotte returns to her seat and drags her palms down the sides of her face in frustration.

Her emerald eyes are fixated on Docklands Pier beyond her studio apartment window.

Outside it's frozen with no signs of life, mirroring her mobile phone. Knots in her stomach fuse as she succumbs to rising anxiety, butterflies intensify.

Verifying the time on her Blackberry screen once more confirms his lack of communication,

increasing her worry, despair. Wild thoughts mask her common sense.

Maybe he lost his phone with my number in it.

He may have left his phone at work.

Perhaps he's caught up talking to his neighbour while checking his letter box.

Or worse, he simply forgot.

Charlotte's thoughts drift back to meeting him, swirling her into a vivid daydream.

'I love travelling,' she re-lives his words at the single's padlock party last night.

Her reply, 'Me too,' as she continued to agree with every statement he made.

Charlotte recalls their mutual instantaneous connection. Her spellbound trance, wanting to know more, have more, experience more. Still buzzing and feeling the most alive she's ever felt; she runs through meeting him in her head.

'Hello,' he had greeted her completely out of nowhere, his sexy tone surprised her. As she spun around, the first thing she noticed was his smile, intriguing.

'Hello,' Charlotte replied, pure disbelief. This gorgeous guy was talking to her when he could've had any girl at that single's party last night.

'How are you beautiful?'

'Fabulous,' she replied, convinced she was talking to the one.

'Come with me,' he insisted.

Charlotte followed.

He led Charlotte through singles drinking and dancing, flirting. Sounds of ocean waves nearby, drowned in dance music and loud conversation. Charlotte remembers standing at the bar as if transported back to that moment in time. 'Don't You Worry Child', Swedish House Mafia, feat. John Martin. White fairy lights illuminated the bar's entrance. Inside bouquets of pink frangipanis surrounded the edges. Old fashioned surfboards suspended above; below dim candles flickered on cheap tables veiled beneath crisp white linen cloths. The romantic beach atmosphere complete with silky white sand, the floor camouflaged. White doves, the only obsession missing, symbolic of limitless love.

Before Charlotte had time to process, he had her engaged in free-flowing conversation.

'Would you like a drink?' He emulated the role of a thoughtful gentleman, flawless.

'I would love one,' Charlotte, dreamy-eyed.

'Tell me about yourself,' Toby insisted, as he handed her a glass of cheap champagne.

'There's not much to tell....'

'I bet you've got plenty to share.'

'What would you like to know?'

'Your green eyes, are they contacts?' He shifted his intense gaze down to her soft pastel pink lips.

'They're real,' Charlotte's flirtatious attempt failed. 'What about you? What's your name?'

'Toby,' he replied, with his hand extended.

'Charlotte,' her hand met his.

Toby realigned her hand to meet his lips. A gentle kiss, eye contact maintained. In that moment, Charlotte was the only girl in Melbourne.

"What can I tell you about me? Well, I'm an electrician. I've built my own company from the ground up, specialising in the commercial and industrial sectors. I'll be the biggest, well-known, and most reliable electrical leader in the industry within two years."

'Wow, impressive...' Charlotte replied lost in thought. Intelligent, gorgeous, dark blonde hair a little messy, tanned skin. Hazel eyes she could get lost in forever. His relaxed jeans hung off his waist. His pale-yellow surf tee highlighted his toned athletic physique concealed beneath, irresistible.

'Are you a surfer, Toby?'

'Me? No, I don't like the beach. I dressed in theme tonight. I'm guessing you love the beach with that gorgeous tan of yours?'

'Me? No, I don't like the beach either. I have this colour all year round,' she replied, feeling self-conscious. She swept her long, shiny, black hair behind her shoulder and felt more self-conscious. Should've left her hair where it was.

'Do you sun bake topless?' Toby asked as he tried to steal a kiss from her.

'No,' she turned away from his advances, recalled Isabel once told her to play hard to get.

'I'm half Indian and half Australian. My mother was born in Bombay and I'm naturally tanned like her.'

'Well, I'd never have guessed. You're absolutely stunning. So, what is it you do in your spare time beautiful?'

'I'm mostly painting.'

'What a coincidence! I love art. What do you love about art?'

'Art represents freedom, freedom of expression, interpretation.'

'Art triggers individual feelings based on one's own life experiences,' Toby said, as he lured her deeper into his man-spell.

'Two people rarely have the same reaction to the same work,' Charlotte replied.

Conversation continued to flow with ease, Toby, always knowing what to say next, charming. Charlotte sensed his hope to get to know her better. She had no doubts since he couldn't keep his hands off her, trying to steal a kiss at every opportunity, persistent.

'Should we see if my key opens your padlock?' he requested after several drinks, his adorable expression imprinted in her memory, one that implied there was plenty more fun to be had beyond the single's padlock party.

Charlotte's phone rings breaking her out of her reminiscing daze.

It's Toby!

Excited, she reads the name glowing on her Blackberry screen, *Isabel*.

Charlotte sighs.

"Hello," Charlotte answers annoyed it's not Toby, not wanting to get stuck on the phone for the next half an hour so she's available to take his call.

"Well, I'm delighted to talk to you too gorgeous!" Isabel flaunts her laissez-faire spirit, "You and me. Three Wishes, 20 minutes!"

Charlotte pauses, considers Isabel's demands.

"Let's call it a date," Isabel insists, before Charlotte says a word.

Charlotte's Blackberry goes dead. She looks at the screen, holds her phone to her ear once more, "Hello... Isabel...."

Frustrated, Charlotte drops her phone back on the counter. Collects her shoes, lip gloss, keys, perfume and bag... She searches for her bag with her hands full, dropping her Tony Bianco, and knocking over her vintage Art Deco emerald vase. Now water cascades over the edge of her coffee table, onto her circular Manhattan designer rug.

"Crap!" Charlotte mutters, as she falls back on her couch and stares up at the ceiling.

When is he going to call me?

Maybe he's busy.

Maybe his dog ran away.

Maybe I should just call him.

Perhaps he ran out of petrol.

Or he's getting petrol.

She stares at the silence, still life. The vacant face on her Blackberry screen, a forgotten painting faces down. The meaning hidden, the message lost, fading deeper into silence. Her instincts censored, the sound of nothing fractures her core a little more.

Charlotte's phone rings.

Toby!

She hurries to her phone, forgetting the messy lounge room floor. Excited, she looks at her Blackberry screen, *Mum*.

Charlotte lets her mother's call go to message bank. She hurries as she grabs a tea towel and soaks up the water off her handmade silk rug, hoping the water doesn't discolour the bright green centre. After one long minute of searching, she spots her bag behind the bathroom door. *How did that get there?* She gathers her scattered belongings before hurrying out the door to meet her best friend Isabel at their local Docklands hangout spot.

**

"This wine's divine," announces Isabel, silence... Still.

"Hello Charlotte, you're miles away!"

"Me? Sorry... What?" Charlotte replies, preoccupied with checking the time.

6.23 pm.

"Who is he?" Isabel demands.

"No one," Charlotte replies with an edge in her tone, making it clear she doesn't wish to discuss the matter.

"He's not worth it!" Isabel states as a matter of fact. She knows guy trouble is responsible for Charlotte's distant mood. She also knows he isn't worth the trouble. "You'll find the love you desire Char. Free advice, if this guy has you this worked up already, maybe he's not the one."

Charlotte doesn't respond.

"You know what Char? Maybe he lied. Maybe he isn't calling you because he's skydiving over Ayres Rock and his phone fell out of his pocket while plummeting back to Earth at speeds of one hundred and fifteen kilometres per hour. Then, upon landing, he got lost, and he's currently walking down a deserted, windy road in the middle of nowhere, trying to get back to civilisation with the parachute blowing off his back in the breeze."

Charlotte considers this new possibility.

Isabel continues her lecture knowing exactly how Charlotte thinks and knowing exactly how some guys behave. "Or maybe, just maybe, he's out with his mates at the pub cracking onto other girls right now as we speak. Don't let these guys delude you, Char."

Isabel knows the impulsive thoughts charging through Charlotte's head. During her defiant teen years, she'd experienced her own wild thoughts, chipping away at her fragile self-esteem. Isabel lost countless hours waiting by the phone, wondering why guys weren't calling, until she worked out there's plenty more fun to have. Instead of sitting around miserable waiting by the phone, she diverted her energy into going out, having fun, and moving on.

"Talk to me," Isabel insists. She's seen Charlotte in this frame of mind countless times.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"You're physically here, but your mind is elsewhere," Isabel assesses the situation. Her own number is off limits as random guys call her every time she gives out her number, and refusing to take no for an answer, pathetic. She knows why the guys are calling her, she also knows they know she won't hassle them after the meaningless act.

This is one conversation that repeats itself.

Charlotte remains silent.

"Charlotte these guys you keep meeting, they're all the same. What's it going to take to get you to move on from this phase where you meet a guy, and plan the wedding and kids' names after the first date?" Isabel lectures Charlotte, with thoughts identical to those Isabel contemplated during her teen years.

"Why does it matter to you?"

"I have to deal with you second guessing yourself. You attract commitment avoiders. I promise these guys sense clingy girls looking for a white picket fence from a mile. It's no seven wonders of the ancient world mystery about why these guys are running marathons to escape," Isabel shares her wisdom.

From experience, Isabel's learned some guys say and do whatever they need to, to get a girl into bed. Once they get the prize they move on, leaving no need to call the next day, the mystery is gone.

"There could be many reasons why he hasn't called."

"Stop, Charlotte. If this guy's interested, he'll call. He won't be too busy or too shy or walking his cat. Geez Char, I don't know how much more I can take. It's the same dead-end cycle. I talk, you pretend to listen. You meet a guy. We arrive back at square one."

"You're judging me without the facts."

"You're dating below your values even when you have the facts. You need to judge guys and set yourself some serious standards. I can clear this up for you right now. You make a mistake and instead of dealing with it, you run from it. While you're on the run, you continue to make even more mistakes. You'll keep making mistakes until you stop running and deal with the real issue."

"My real issue." Charlotte crosses her arms. "What's that?"

"You're desperately searching for love. To learn from your mistakes, you need time to reflect. Remove yourself from the situation so you can see the games these guys are playing. You can't see the truth if you're caught up in their lies and games. Step back and observe. Over time, reflect on what you see. The truth is right in front of you. I'm trying to help you get back on track."

"Why did you want to see me?" Charlotte asks, ignoring Isabel's outbursts and not so subtly changing the subject. Charlotte knows what guys are like, but Toby's different. He'll call, eventually.

"I want to see my best friend, is that okay?" Isabel's concerned. There's nothing she can do or say to make Charlotte forget, move on, and get back in touch with reality.

"If you say so. Why do I get the feeling you have a crazy story?" Charlotte asks, already knowing she doesn't want to know the answer.

"Since you asked, last night after I finished my DJ set, I sat around at Vapour bored. Madison had plans. I think it's a guy..." Isabel rambles off track. "Anyway, I was drinking on the rooftop waiting for Heidi to finish behind the bar. We ended up drinking cocktails until close."

"That explains the sunglasses," Charlotte observes.

"Heidi finished at 3 am, she had no plans afterwards," Isabel continues, still in shock since Heidi's in a different bed almost every weekend.

"So what happened?" Charlotte urges the story along because she'll never guess what Isabel gets up to, ever.

"I was talking with some guys from interstate here for a company seminar or something. I

can't remember the industry, who they worked for, or what the seminar was about. Luckily, whatever it is, isn't until Monday morning. That should give him plenty of time to recover..." Isabel drifts back off track.

"Uh... Huh..." Charlotte responds with no interest, wondering how this story can get any better.

"One guy mentioned a spa in his hotel room, and a mini bar stocked up with imported beer. I informed Heidi of this discovery which was closely followed by excessive flirting. I mean this guy thought he was getting... You know...."

"I can guess, yes."

"Our hard work paid off. When Vapour closed, he invited us back to his room and our plan fell into place," Isabel divulges the details, matter of fact.

"Oh," Charlotte senses Isabel misbehaved last night and she's hoping to be spared the explicit details.

"So, when we arrived at his hotel in St Kilda, he sneaked us in through the back entry near the lifts. Once we were inside his hotel room on the third floor, Heidi and I filled the spa, slowly removing one piece of clothing at a time. Then we raided his mini bar in our underwear while we continued to flirt with him. Finally, we ordered him to get naked and wait for us to call him."

"This is too much information."

"My story has a happy ending. Stay with me for a moment. So, while he was getting his gear off, we locked ourselves in his bathroom with his imported beer."

"Of course you did. Does he have a name?" Charlotte laughs, unsurprised. She hears these stories from Isabel every other week.

"I don't know Jacko, Jack something. Anyway, Heidi and I relaxed together, laughing and drinking beer in some stranger's spa."

"Wow. I imagine he wasn't very impressed."

"I don't care to be honest. He was stupid enough to extend the invite. When we finished his beer we got out of the spa, dried off, dressed, and snuck out, leaving him passed out drunk on the hotel room bed, naked," Isabel says extremely satisfied.

"So it was a normal night for you then?" Charlotte smiles in approval, Isabel's always having fun.

Charlotte wishes she could let loose and be crazy sometimes, but she knows she won't follow through with anything that outrageous. Plus, she'd feel guilty for the poor victim afterwards.

"At least you're finally smiling. We have a girls' weekend away to finalise." Isabel's calm, as though she's talking about the weather.

"I'll pass," Charlotte replies automatically.

"And sit around waiting for some loser to call? No way, you're coming. I've made reservations for next weekend. We're going to a rainforest retreat at the Black Spur. Think spas, massages, and facials, oh and French champagne of course," Isabel finishes the conversation, unopened for a two-way discussion.

"You mean fighting, bitching, gossiping, oh and back-stabbing. Remember how the last girl's weekend away ended on the Gold Coast?" Charlotte protests, raising one eyebrow.
"We agreed never to talk about that again, remember? Anyway, it's only an overnighter. What could possibly go wrong? Look, I've got to go, just keep next weekend free."
Isabel kisses Charlotte goodbye and hurries off before Charlotte convinces her otherwise. *What am I going to do now?* Charlotte drags herself back home to return her mother's phone call she avoided earlier.
Instead, she calls Toby.

Charlotte & Toby

Toby

Saturday

"What did you get up to last night mate?" Riley asks Alex as he racks up the billiard balls. Alex chalks up the end of his pool cue. "A boring beach party for singles. Some padlock thing to find love, apparently."
"That's lame!" Riley agrees. He aligns the black ball with the black dot on the green felt surface before removing the black, plastic triangle. "Any success with that goal of yours last night?"
"Mate, you should know by now you don't need to ask me that."
"How close are you to your target?"
"A little over halfway mate. No hurry. Doing each girl as they come for now," Alex brags as he breaks the balls. Nothing's down except the white ball that bounces off the edge of the pool table.
"Hookers don't count remember," Riley jokes, as he runs after the white ball.
"We don't pay them for sex, we pay them to leave."
The guys laugh.
"What about you? Staying in and watching DVDs with the misses on Saturday nights yet?" Alex teases.
"Don't you worry about me mate. My Saturday night DVD sessions are still a long way off. You know the only kind of DVDs I watch," Riley hints towards the pornography option.
"Yeah, I'll give it two months. Fifty bucks, say I call in two months, actually no, make it a month from now, I call you for beers on a Saturday night, and you reject me to sit at home and watch DVDs with the wife," Alex challenges.
"You're on, fifty bucks mate!"
The guys shake hands.
It's late Saturday afternoon and Alex is at the local pub with his best mate Riley, who he believes is about to make the biggest mistake of his life. Alex is the honourable best man at

the wedding. Riley has no idea what Alex has planned for his Buck's Night.

Riley finishes his beer. "It's my shout. You up for another?"

"Another question you never need to ask, mate!"

Riley calls over a waitress and orders two pints. "What are you planning for my bucks?"

Alex laughs. "Don't want to ruin the fun."

Alex booked a fishing boat that's followed by dinner at a private venue. Next stop, the casino to get blind drunk, then call into the strippers on the way home.

"A few just walked in," Alex nods towards the pub's entrance with a sleazy, satisfied smile.

"Another great finish."

"You're confident mate. What makes you think you can fuck one of them?" Riley sinks another small ball, the third in a row.

"This game is too easy. There's always one girl in the group up for some action."

Riley's known Alex since high school. He knows exactly how Alex works. They both lost their virginity at sixteen with prostitutes. Both agreed to sleep with five hundred girls. The first to achieve the target wins. Riley made it to 127 on his playlist, until he met his fiancé last year. He grew out of playing around. Alex, however, is still going stronger than ever.

"You'll get pussy tonight..."

Alex's iPhone rings.

He looks at the screen.

DoNotAnswer268 is calling... "Shit!"

Alex doesn't exchange numbers, but last night was a rare challenge.

"Who's that?" Riley asks.

"A chick from that bloody single's padlock party. Number 268 to be exact." Alex's frustrated as he takes his shot, the black ball finds the pocket. "Shit!"

"Game over. You're behind the eight ball with that crazy chick mate. You're screwed if you gave her your number. Your name's recorded on your voicemail and she'll stalk you on Facebook."

"I tried everything. I had to give her my number, it was the only way. She thinks my name's Toby, and I borrowed this phone from my mate Alex."

"I hope you're right. Good luck with your padlock party fiasco. I'm off mate, until next week." Riley finishes his beer and rests his empty glass on a cardboard coaster, the white beer froth slides down the glass.

"Next week mate," Alex replies.

Riley leaves.

Alex stays.

His eyes focused on his next target.

His mind focused on 500.

**

Alex waits for the right time to approach the group of girls. In the meantime, he switches his ringtone to silent and shakes his head as he slides his phone into his pocket. Anyone watching him would assume he's waiting for a mate.

Alex watches the four girls and drinks another beer.

He waits.

The girls might be meeting other guys, but no guys come.

Alex has already selected the one.

He approaches the girl's table and starts a conversation.

"Hello, I'm Toby," Alex says, as he offers his hand around the table.

The four girls say their names.

He only pays attention to one.

"Having a great night?" he asks.

"Yeah," one replies.

This is not the one.

"What brings you lovely ladies here tonight?"

The same girl speaks. "Nothing. We don't need a reason to drink."

"I can't argue with that," Alex agrees, with his trademark smile.

"Look, to be honest ladies, I'm ready for another drink but I'm still waiting for my mate. Can I interest any of you sweethearts in a drink?"

A different girl in the group speaks. "May I have a vodka cruiser, please?"

This is the one.

"Sure," Alex replies, signalling for a waitress. "Are you heading out after this?"

"We're not sure yet. We're hanging back to see if we hear of any places going off."

"Do you all come here often?" Alex checks he won't run into them again, since it's his local pub.

"Nar, first time. We move around," the one responds.

Alex smiles. He's found some serious party girls.

The waitress arrives to note down their drink order.

Wasting no time, Alex sets out to impress the group.

He makes an offer to test how far these girls will go. "What do you say we all do a shot? My shout."

Another girl in the group speaks. "Shot what exactly?"

"Tequila," he suggests.

"Sure, we're interested."

Alex orders Tequila shots from the waitress before turning his full, undivided attention to the one.

"Can I just tell you, you're beautiful?"

He works on the one with empty compliments, visualises her naked, imagines having sex with her.

"You just did."

"You're the most beautiful girl in this room."

The one gazes into his eyes and smiles at him.

"There's something different about you?"

"How can you tell?" she challenges him.

"First impressions. I'm a good judge of character. What do you do with your spare time?"

"I'm a cheerleader for the NBL."

"Which team?"

"The Melbourne Tigers," she boasts.

"You're kidding? That's my team!" Alex lies. "Do you think they'll make the finals this season?"

"I know they will. So, what's your story?"

"What do you mean?" he checks for clarification to avoid walking into a trap. Some girls can be smart. He always aims to be smarter.

"Where are you from?"

"Local."

"Seeing anyone?"

Alex shakes his head as the Tequila shots arrive. The group passes around lemon wedges and a saltshaker. He holds two lemon wedges in his possession. When the saltshaker reaches him, he pours the salt on his neck. The one gets the message. Reluctantly, she agrees and slowly runs the tip of her tongue along Alex's neck. They drink the Tequila shot in unison.

"If you want your lemon wedge, you'll have to come and get it," Alex teases playfully, as he places her lemon wedge between his lips. Slowly she moves in towards him, taking the lemon wedge between her teeth. Her lips brush past his as she removes the lemon wedge with one feisty pull. He smiles at her knowing he's in for sure.

"You're my type of girl."

"Am I just?" she flirts back.

"Anything else you'd like to know?" he asks the one, giving her his full, undivided attention. The one sucks on her lemon wedge, squints with a sour face. "What do you do work wise?"

"I'm an electrician."

She digs deeper. "Who do you work for?"

"I have my own business, servicing commercial sites around central Melbourne. I built my company from the ground up. Ultimately, I aim to be the biggest and best electrical service in the industry. In fact, this year should be my first turnover of over one million dollars in a financial year."

"I'm impressed."

The one imagines Alex's lifestyle. It's a lifestyle she assumes she'll gain if she dates him.

"My mate stood me up. Would you like to walk along the beach?"

Before the one answers, her friend's phone beeps.

"Hey, let's head to Vapour. We're on the guest list as of now," she says, as she hits send on

her acceptance text.

"What do you want to do?" Alex asks the one. "I'll make sure you get home safe if you want to come with me, no pressure."

The one agrees to stay with Alex and separate from her friends.

They walk along St Kilda beach, hand in hand.

He finds a private spot.

They sit on the sand and talk. They listen to the waves and look above to the first stars shining in the summer night's sky.

They talk more, hold hands. As the cool sea breeze settles in for the night, he wraps his arms around the one's shoulders to keep her warm.

"How do you feel about sex on the beach?" Alex asks the one, tests her reaction.

Her reaction depends on his next move. If she appears shocked or offended, he'll say he's only joking.

"I'm pro sex on the beach. What about you, Toby?"

"I love the beach," he says, as he sweeps her hair away from her shoulder, before gently kissing her neck.

"Same," she whispers.

He looks into her eyes. "There's a fire in your eyes Jasmine, that I simply cannot resist."

Alex adds one more to his target.

269.

Sofie & Nate

Sofie

Sunday

Sofie wakes unwillingly from a restless night's sleep, aware instantly that her uncooperative eyelids remain tightly sealed shut. Her dazed mind is incapable of a rational thought process. She attempts to lift her heavy arms, realising they require too much energy to be useful.

Instead, she unavoidably tunes into the neighbour's dog barking excessively, forcing her to live in the present moment and face her patiently waiting reality. Birds sing in the distance, occasionally, and only when the dog momentarily ceases barking to catch its breath.

Melbourne's in the midst of a long hot summer. The Sunday morning sun rises early to overheat the city once again.

Sofie releases a drained groan in protest, irrefutably lacking the energy essential to battle the new day. She rolls over facing the bed space beside her, eyes still locked shut. Straining to raise her arm, she thumps the bed space shifting her arm along the surface with each thump. She continues to thump the crisp white sheets, with her face mashed into her pillow. She drags her arm up and fumbles for the pillow beside her. As she feels the soft feathers cave under her heavy hand, she realises the bed space beside her is empty. Her

hand sinks deeper into the soft feathery pillow.

"Shit," Sofie mutters into her pillow, realising this is not a bad dream.

Half asleep, she rolls over and opens one eye. Her clock reads 6.33 am.

Nate's disappeared, again.

Sofie's mind, already drained, suffers further deflation and confusion. The unknown rushes forward causing panic. Worry, angst, and rejection leave her empty, numb. With her body limp and lifeless, she stares up at the ceiling with tears pooling at her eye's edge.

Her thoughts blur. Her heart breaks, intense, debilitating.

The plan was for Nate to have dinner with Sofie then sleep at her place, until he cancelled at the last minute. This is fast becoming an unwelcoming habit of Nate's. One where he delivers Sofie a well thought out believable excuse days after the incident.

Sophie left the keys out so Nate could let himself in after footy training, his excuse for cancelling. Nate never showed up after the training session finished. Sofie believes Nate's excuses out of fear of losing the only love she has ever known. A love she is not only obsessed with, but one without, she believes she cannot live.

It was year ten at high school when Sofie moved schools to live with her father after ignoring her mother's house rules, that her infatuation with Nate took hold.

That was six years ago.

As high school sweethearts they were the cool couple others were envious of, gorgeous, young and carefree, inseparable. After finishing year twelve, Nate went out with the boys leaving Sofie behind occasionally at first. Over time, it became leaving her behind every weekend. These days she sees him once or twice a week.

Sofie ignores the red flags signalling her intuition warnings. Instead, she strives to be the best girlfriend. The thought of going separate ways is a thought Sofie cannot handle.

Especially the thought of him touching someone else which sends poison through her veins.

The alternative, staying together, is tearing her apart.

Losing her identity long ago, Sofie has no idea who she is anymore. Sofie wants Nate and their relationship to be how they were back in high school. Not in high school anymore, their relationship hasn't changed and adapted as both of their lives have changed and progressed to this point. Her life has changed. His life has changed. They've both changed as individuals in opposite directions, yet Sofie holds onto hope that they will once again be as they were in the past, again in the future.

Sophie checks her phone, hoping Nate contacted her overnight.

No texts.

No missed calls.

No email.

No voicemail.

No social media.

Sofie no longer worries that Nate's been injured from training or a car accident. The thought of him jumping into a fight to help the underdog and ending up on life support no longer enters her mind. From this point forward, she has no idea when she'll hear from her boyfriend next. The same waiting game she's forced to play, starts again. Waiting by the phone wondering where her boyfriend is and why he hasn't called.

Continuing to love him desperately and hopelessly, her life empty without him, she rolls

over and cries herself back to sleep and makes a familiar promise to herself.
This will be the last time.

Sofie & Nate

Nate

Sunday

Nate wakes clueless, and way too early for a Sunday morning.

He doesn't know the time.

He has no idea where he is.

Sunlight leaks into the foreign yellow space through wooden rustic blinds drawn carelessly from the night previous.

A painting on the wall of St Kilda beach catches his attention. The lifeguard headquarters, his workplace, is the last place on his mind.

Nate lifts his head. Faced with his reflection in a full-length mirror ahead, he observes wild brown curls forming into a mini afro. His head pounds from the excessive amount of alcohol he consumed last night.

Delicately, he rolls his head to one side. A black Eiffel tower rests on wooden drawers, and there's a flat screen in the corner with a stack of DVDs beside it. With no recollection of how he came to be in this unfamiliar room, Nate's certain this is not a bad dream. He's not in his own bed, not even at a mate's house. He needs to sneak out without waking anyone and find a taxi, fast.

Nate closes his hazel eyes, pissed off, because he's physically unable to move. Still drunk, his body refuses to cooperate.

Flashbacks from the night before takeover.

Shots of tequila line the bar.

Beer, lots of beer.

A short red dress suspended around the top of tanned legs.

The disabled toilets with a blonde and a line of coke on the toilet roll holder.

Nate recalls being locked in a disabled toilet for what seemed like hours with the girl in a revealing red dress. The toilet door latch broke off in Nate's hand. Several failed rescue attempts to call friends - hopeless due to loud music - meant their stay was prolonged.

It wasn't until the girl's friend rang to accuse her of leaving with some random, that the rescue had begun. Her friend alerted security who busted them out a few minutes later. The girl lectured the confused security about how, 'That wasn't funny,' and 'What about disabled people?' She caught security off guard, saving them a lecture, and an explanation about what was going on in there.

Hunter called in for a beer and joked that Nate ditched him for a chick he'd known for half an hour. He gave Nate shit about his inability to perform. Excessive alcohol consumption, the real reason Nate locked himself in the toilet. Even suggesting stage fright hindered his performance.

An arm comes out of nowhere and slaps Nate in the face, bringing him out of his dazed flashbacks. For the first time, he realises there's a girl asleep in the bed beside him. He can't remember what the girl in the red dress looked like. He definitely can't remember her name.

Unable to confirm or deny that the girl lying beside him is the same girl in the red dress, brings Nate back to reality.

Last night he cancelled spending time with Sofie to go to the pub with the guys from his footy team. They had a drink, played pool, and flirted with girls. Nate went back to a girl's house. He spent the night in a stranger's bed, with no recollection of last night's sex.

Nate's secret is safe with Hunter.

Hunter also knows how much Sofie annoys Nate when they go out, the real reason Nate won't invite her. Sofie criticises how much Nate drinks and she doesn't like his friends. She does stupid shit that only she thinks is funny to get attention, embarrassing Nate in front of his mates. Adding to that list after two beers, Sofie hassles him to leave.

Nate's already planning the story he'll tell Sofie. He fell asleep in front of the TV after footy training and woke at 1 am, by which time it was too late to head over. He didn't call or text because he didn't want to wake her.

Nate attempts to sit, his head spins. He's nauseous and dehydrated. He rests his head back on the soft feather pillow and realises at that moment he's naked, and he has no idea where his clothes are.

"Shit!"

He attempts to compose himself enough to get the hell out.

Nate looks back at these ill-fated moments and laughs about them with his mates, since it's too much of an effort for him to laugh about it now.

**

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