

Becoming the Fourth Notch

by Hannah Ray Lambert

*“This is what you learned in college: A man desires the satisfaction of his desire;
a woman desires the condition of desiring.”*

Pam Houston, “How to Talk to a Hunter.”

When he tells you, “You’re not just any girl,” you believe him because you are seventeen and have never liked anyone as much as you like him. And when you’re lying next to him and he has his arms around you, he makes you feel like everything is perfect.

Four months later you realize he didn’t technically lie to you. When you said you were worried about sleeping with him because you didn’t want to figure out, later, that you gave it up to someone who didn’t care about you, he didn’t tell you that you were silly to think he didn’t care. No. Instead, he answered a question you didn’t ask.

But, with infatuation clouding your better judgment, you accept what you want to hear.

You meet at the end of August. Looking back, you won’t remember the exact day or moment. Just that something about him caught your eye. Maybe it was because he was loud and energetic and just so alive.

Or maybe you saw that he was the type of guy that wouldn’t be too clingy or ever like you too much; something you were sure you wanted back then, after four years of high school, when any boy who liked you came on way too strong. You could tell that he wasn’t like that. And that was part of the appeal.

In no time at all you become a giggling, flirty mess, reminiscent of a thirteen-year old girl. Any time he talks to you or shoots you a glance that only the two of you catch, you feel like you can fly.

And any time he doesn’t... well, you remind yourself that he cannot possibly be interested in you. That you were stupid to think that a girl like you – quiet, awkward, and not exceptional looking in any way – could attract the attention of a guy you actually like.

But there will be that night. You and your new friends spend the night drinking in Niki's room. It will be the first time you've had more than a sip of alcohol and you discover that you are a lightweight and a very flirtatious drunk. While playing the world's friendliest game of Go-Fish – "Do you have any kings?" "No." "Oh. Well, what do you have?" – you almost admit to him that you like him.

Almost.

Later, though, you learn that it was blatantly obvious the entire time.

After everyone goes to bed, you cannot sleep. So you get up and go to his room and knock on his door. He lets you in, his dark hair sticking up in sleepy tufts, and you spend hours talking. At one point, you are both hungry, and he makes you Ramen in the kitchen while everyone else on the floor is asleep.

He tells you about his family and spending the summer working on his grandfather's farm. He also mentions how all of the guys on the floor are competing for your attention and you won't believe that because it is too outlandish. But you want to ask him if he's competing too.

You won't though, because the answer couldn't possibly be yes, and hearing that out loud would be too much of a disappointment.

Eventually, the sun starts to rise and you both go to the top floor of the building and look out the massive windows over the cluster of brick buildings and rolling hills; and it feels like the most beautiful sunrise you have ever seen.

A few days later he asks you to be his girlfriend, and of course you say yes, and feel so happy that you think you couldn't possibly be sad ever again.

For the first few weeks, everything is wonderful. He is much more experienced than you, having already slept with three different girls, so things move quickly. Your best friend from back home is happy to hear about this, encouraging you to be "corrupted."

"Go do bad things," she orders.

And you will; but not because she told you to, because you want to. Because when you're with him, you act like a different version of yourself. You're happy and easy going and you have more fun. You go along with things that normally would seem like a stupid idea.

Of course, you get annoyed with him sometimes. If there is one thing you're good at, it's finding flaws in guys. Some of his flaws aren't so minor, though you won't accept that at

the time; like how his biggest concern before and after you lose your virginity is whether or not you'll become too attached to him.

You are lying in your room one night with your head on his chest and an arm over his body and he chooses that moment to ask, "So, now that we've had sex, you're not going to get all clingy, are you?"

You instantly bristle, and a deep hollow feeling precedes your anger that he said such a thing to you. But then you get angry at yourself for being stupid enough to think that he actually cared about you as more than just a casual fling. And you wish that you hadn't slept with him in the first place because, even though you never thought sex would be a big thing for you, it turns out that you were wrong about that too.

But instead of calling him out on being a jerk, you reply icily, "I don't do clingy. I can't believe you'd even think that."

And by the next day, you have put his comment out of your mind, and things will be good again.

After that, it seems like he does something to disappoint you every other day. You don't see him or hear from him all day until, finally, at five o'clock or even later, he stops by your room for a few minutes, promising to "come bother you later" and then doesn't show up again for hours. He doesn't call or even text you for the first three days of Thanksgiving break, and when your parents ask how he's doing, you lie and say, "He's doing okay. Just hanging out with his family and seeing his friends back home." Because you can't let them know the truth.

Back at school, you realize that your relationship is practically like being single, given how much time you spend alone. Except that, now when you're alone, you're wishing he was there.

One weekend, you spend all day in your room with your new friend Cole, doing homework for the most part, so it's pretty quiet and you wish more than anything that he was there instead. As usual, you won't see him until late afternoon, when he stops by to let you know that he and his friend Alex are going to work out (which they have been doing all the time lately, leaving you to get dinner alone or with Cole).

"But we'll be back around six and then we can go get dinner," he says.

At 6:50, you text him to see if he's back yet.

Soon after seven, you text him again, to let him know that you're just going to get food and that maybe you'll see him later.

At nine, he finally arrives. You ignore him by staring at your computer screen, because you are angry and want him to think that you don't care about him either.

After a few moments, Cole leaves to get something from his room, and your boyfriend sits down on your bed and sulks. "I feel like a third wheel around you guys."

"Why?"

"Because you hang out together in here, all day."

"You could have hung out here too," you reply dryly.

"I didn't want to intrude..."

"Please. You wouldn't have been intruding."

After a long pause, he asks, "Is Cole trying to steal you away from me?"

"Why would you think that?"

"He hangs out with you all the time and ... I don't know. Alex thinks it's weird too. Do you think he's after you?"

"I don't think so." You are silently a little pleased that he seems worried.

Then Cole returns, oblivious to the tension in the room. You drop hints that he should leave. Finally, he packs up his things. Once he is gone, you say, "We're just friends. I'm glad he hangs out with me. It beats being alone all day."

This is the closest you have come to stating the fact that your boyfriend now mostly ignores you.

"I know. I'm always working out with Alex..." he will start, but you cut him off.

"All day?"

Silence.

You get up and grab your sweatshirt, meticulously putting it on its hanger and then storing it neatly in your closet. Then you do the same with the sweatshirts hanging from your bed post. You need something, anything, to distract you so that you don't have to look at him. Because you feel yourself getting far too upset.

"You don't think I'm just in this for the sex, do you?" he asks.

You continue staring into your closet.

A second later, he says, "Your silence worries me."

You still don't respond, but you climb up next to him on your bed, leaving a couple of feet between your shoulders. He looks down at his hands and you stare intently at the wall.

After an impossibly long silence, he says in the saddest voice you have ever heard him use, "We need to spend more time together." He sounds like he thinks he has really done something wrong, and you will just look at him and nod because you cannot talk when you're upset.

For a couple of days, things get better again.

But you will be stupid and expect it to last.

In January, you confront him about the way he's been treating you. But you tell him that you don't want to break up because you do have a good time together. You tell him that you just want him to stop partying every night because you want to see him sometimes, and going to parties with him is not fun for you.

And he tells you to spend more time with your own friends and go out with other people and dance with other guys at parties. And even though you are not a party girl, you agree to do that more often, and think that he is right and that your problems are partly your fault.

And then you feel like everything is perfect for a while.

As usual, though, that feeling goes away and you remind yourself that he still classifies your relationship as casual.

You tell your best friend from home this, and she tells you to talk to him. And you tell her that you did, but it didn't change anything.

You decide to wait a couple more weeks because you cannot bring yourself to let go of him quite yet. The very thought of being without him makes you feel sick. If things don't change, though, you will break up with him. You won't be the kind of girl who spends more than half a year on a guy that doesn't even care about her.

But he beats you to the punch.

He takes you to a party at the frat he is trying to join and, surprisingly, he doesn't ditch you and you have a lot of fun. But you get way more intoxicated than you have before. When you finally go home, you can barely walk and he has to drag you along down the dark campus sidewalks, stopping every few steps to coax you to keep walking and not sit down and "for God's sake, stop laughing so much. It's not even funny."

When you get back, you grab him and kiss him so hard even though you told yourself, and him, that you wouldn't have sex with him tonight. You don't tell him the reason though, that you feel terrible about yourself every time you sleep with him.

And he reminds you of what you said, but you tell him that you want to, and the reason he made you drink so much at the party was so that you would have sex with him, so why was he objecting?

Of course, he is easily swayed.

After, you both lie there, the buzz wearing off. He asks why you originally didn't want to sleep with him.

With your filter gone, you answer, "Because I don't like casual. And that's all we are." He says something about how he doesn't want a serious relationship until senior year. And then you realize that you have made a terrible mistake.

He knows that you are crying, even though you try to hide it, lying with your face pressed against the sheets.

After you have managed to stop your tears, he says, "I need to tell you something tomorrow."

Your stomach drops. "Just tell me now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'd rather not wait."

He sighs, and then tells you that he wants to break up.

Maybe it's the alcohol, but you don't really feel anything upon hearing this. You just say, "Oh. Okay."

"How do you feel about that?"

You think that's a stupid question, but you'll slowly reply, "Well, I can't change your mind, so it doesn't really matter how I feel. But I guess I'm curious why."

He takes a moment before answering, "I just... I didn't want to date anyone when I came to school and then I met you and really liked you. I mean, I still really like you, but I want to be able to meet other people."

"Other girls," you clarify matter-of-factly, surprising yourself with how calmly you are taking this.

"Yeah," he admits. "But obviously, I can't do that with a clear conscience if I'm dating you."

"Obviously," you echo.

"You're taking this really well."

You shrug, still amazed that you don't feel anything. "It's not like I'm surprised. I mean, it's not like you ever cared about me to begin with."

"Yeah," he admits. And even hearing that out loud doesn't make you cry. You wonder if there's something wrong with you. Not that you mind. You don't want him to see you get emotional.

Then he says, "Can we still be friends?"

And you reply in a small voice, "Maybe. After a while."

He says okay and promises to give you some space for a while.

And then he puts on his shoes and leaves.

When the door closes, you lie back down in your bed and stare into the dark room, engulfed by silence except for the perpetual ticking of your roommate's clock.

The next day you find out about the game from Niki; about why one of the reasons he broke up with you was to compete with his friends, earning points for how far they can get with as many girls as possible.

You have to accept the fact that you gave everything to a guy who broke up with you so that he could play a stupid game.

But even worse is knowing that you really have no right to be surprised; that you knew the entire time that he didn't treat you right and didn't deserve you, but you convinced yourself that, if you just stuck around long enough, he'd realize how good you were for him and how much he did care about you. Funny how that never happened!

That's when the crying starts. A kind of crying you've never experienced before, where your chest feels like it is caving in and your lungs can't get enough air and, sometimes, it feels like you are actually dying, drowning, suffocating.

Your roommate hugs you and tells you that she knows how you feel and that she's there if you need her. Your best friend, from back home, calls to congratulate you on your changed relationship status.

"I know it's tough," she says. "But you're better than anything he'll ever have. Too bad he doesn't see that."

When you tell your mom that he broke up with you, skimming over the details and reasons why, she's nice at first, but eventually slips in that obligatory, "I told you so." And you half laugh, half sob, "Thanks, Mom."

You become surprisingly good friends with his best friend, Alex, who you thought resented the time your boyfriend spent with you. But you find out that Alex liked you the whole time.

Through Alex, you find out more than you wanted to know about the points game; like who is winning and exactly how many points each intimate act is worth. Inadvertently, you learn that he used you for points on the board.

And then you feel so incredibly stupid for believing that he broke up with you so that he could start playing the game. You realize that the only reason he stayed with you for as long as he did, was so he could try to get the last fifty points you were worth. And this will tear open all those wounds that had begun to close. But really, did it surprise you

that he used you for a game, and that when you weren't worth any more points, to keep competing, he went after other girls?

But there were still those moments. Like the hours he spent driving over Christmas break, just to come see you. And he never once complained, or asked that you make the drive instead.

And on New Year's Eve, when he took you to the party that his friends back home were throwing, he came over between lighting off fireworks to hug you and make sure you were warm enough in his jacket. And then, when everyone piled into the living room to crash for the night, you both squeezed onto the couch inside a sleeping bag. And his arms were so tight around you, and you came so close to letting yourself think that, maybe, he was starting to fall in love with you.

But, even the best moments weren't perfect; because the voice in your head would remind you that you were just something fun for him when there was nothing more exciting going on. And you blame yourself for allowing him to use you like that.

The only times that you feel okay are the moments when you do not think about him. Sometimes you spend hours wishing that you had broken up with him much sooner than you did. Still, more often than you like to admit, you think that if you'd done things differently; maybe given him more space, he wouldn't have broken up with you.

Months later, you find out that he is now dating a girl you used to think was your friend. You feel the impact of hearing this, but in a numb sort of way because, lately, nothing has really hurt anymore.

Three months later, walking along the sidewalk, jacket pulled tight around you, you see him. He is alone and you don't have your friends to distract you.

You keep your face down as you pass him, but he says your name to stop you.

"What?" You keep your arms firmly crossed against the cold.

He looks mockingly taken aback by your curt tone. "Rough day or something?"

"It was fine until you I saw you." The wind picks up pieces of your hair and whips them across your face.

He has the decency to look at least a little stung by your comment. "You're still mad at me."

"No, but I learned the hard way what kind of guy you are, and I wish I'd never gone out with you." You clench your arms tighter around your stomach.

He looks at the ground before asking, "Was I really that bad?"

"The worst mistake I ever made, but I'll never make that mistake again. So just stay away from me until you graduate. Then hopefully we'll never see each other again."

He doesn't move, but after a second he looks at you with a sad expression on his face, and says in a broken voice, "I'm really sorry. For everything."

You shake your head, your eyes tearing from the sting of the bitter wind. "No you're not. It's all just a game for you," and you walk away.

Someday in the future, you will feel good again. You are going to do great things with your life. You will meet a cute boy through one of your friends, in class, or just by random chance. He will be smart and funny and, most importantly, a good person. Eventually, you will start dating and you will feel all the good parts of a relationship, without the disappointment and loneliness from the last time. After a while, you will fall in love with this boy.

And, this time, he will fall in love with you too.