

Lizzie Lawson

HOW TO KEEP GUYS INTERESTED

It was 2009. I was fifteen and had just been kissed for the first time. Perhaps this was the reason my best friend, Martha, and I were tearing through the display of five for \$8 underwear at Charlotte Russe, with all the slippery fabric and tiny bows we could dream of.

We agonized over our five selections, fingering the underwear in the bin. "You have to get at least one G-string," Martha said, tossing a bubblegum shoelace thong my direction. Martha was still in eighth grade at the Catholic middle school I used to go to. I'd just started at the public high school up the street. We were the type of friends who straightened each other's hair and called twenty times until the other picked up.

Leafing through the piles, we angled our bodies to catch our reflections in the store mirror. Braces had given way to mostly straight teeth. Glasses were traded in for contacts. Our hair was flat-ironed stick straight, and we kept running our fingers through it, worried it would fluff. We traded smiles as we bunched our favorite thongs in our palms. My parents wouldn't approve of sexy undergarments, but they didn't have to know. This week, I had let a boy kiss me.

After shelling out eight dollars, we took off to sample lip glosses at Bath & Body Works until Martha's mom picked us up. Bundled under my winter coat, I felt the gentle tug of the Charlotte Russe bag on my arm and glowed with new warmth and knowledge. I was a woman now.

Saturday, I woke to my mom preparing breakfast for my dad. The back door slammed as my dad arrived home from his eight o'clock chapel hour. Kitchen chairs slid against the floor, and my parents' voices carried up to my room.

She was on the computer until 10:45 the other night when I told her... Are you sure she vacuumed the whole room because sometimes she... She's

being difficult about her outfit for speech team...

The Charlotte Russe bag was hidden in my dresser drawer, and I taped the receipt into my journal as a souvenir from the night. Now that it was morning, though, the thongs worried me. Immodesty was a sin, but how could the thongs be immodest if they were under my clothes? No one else would see them. Still, I knew my parents and our parish priest would think differently, which meant I was being disobedient, another sin. I rolled toward the wall and stayed buried under the covers. I couldn't bring myself to be part of the house yet.

The first time I slept at Martha's house, we watched *Step Up* (2006) from a laptop propped on our thighs. Teen movies were a novelty to me, and *Step Up* had all the right aesthetics—actors in their twenties playing teenagers, muscled guys and long-legged girls with exposed midriffs, golden sunset shots with locked eyes.

The plot was simple. Tyler, a troubled hip-hop dancer, is sentenced to community service at a fancy private school for the arts, where he meets Nora, a gifted ballet student in search of a dance partner. Martha and I admired Tyler's abs and lopsided grin. "Why don't guys at school dance like that?" said Martha, her finger leaving a print on the screen.

We criticized Nora for being prissy and uptight, the kind of private school girl we didn't want to be, though, truthfully, I wasn't fitting into my new public school the way I'd hoped. Sometimes I went entire school days without saying a word to anyone.

"Why does he like her?" Martha said, though it was less likely Tyler would be interested in us. We blotted concealer over our acne and each had two solid outfits we felt good in. Tyler dances by Nora's side during her senior showcase, holding her steady in the final lift. Martha and I woke up bleary-eyed the next morning and started the movie from the beginning.

My first kiss happened with Jordan, a football player from my English class who made fun of my off-brand UGG boots and touched another

girl's leg a lot. He got my number and texted me jokes about our English teacher, called me *babe*, and asked what would happen if he kissed me. I wasn't attracted to him, but he was one of the few people who occasionally talked to me.

Jordan convinced me to meet at his house one day after school, and I talked to Martha on the walk, pressing my phone to my ear under the hood of my jacket.

"Are you sure it's safe?" Martha asked. We'd spent hours stalking him on Myspace the weekend before, and she did not understand his appeal.

I said I didn't know. Jordan seemed experienced. There was a possibility he might try to go further than kissing—a thought that made my mind freeze up. When I reached Jordan's driveway, he was looking through the glass. "I'll text you if anything bad happens," I told Martha before hanging up.

Jordan had said to bring a movie, so I brought *Gladiator*, a movie my dad and I used to watch together on Friday nights before I spent every Friday with Martha. I held up the DVD case, thinking he'd be impressed, but he just steered me toward the basement.

We lay propped on our elbows on the carpet. The movie played for a few minutes before Jordan took out his phone and typed a message. My phone buzzed.

Do you want to do stuff?

Sure... I texted back.

Jordan rolled on top of me. His face came toward mine, and I instinctively turned away. When he came toward me again, I forced myself to stay still. Our mouths met. His tongue jabbed in circles like a hand searching through a purse. His fingers groped at my bra. I shoved them away.

The encounter was over in minutes. Then Jordan was on his feet, saying I should leave before his dad came home. I put my backpack and coat on and walked home. Why had he made me leave so suddenly?

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In those days, I spent as much time as I could at Martha's house. I'd walk through the door and put on Martha's sweatshirt and curl up on her couch. Martha's mom helped us pluck our eyebrows and gave us nutrition supplements she got from work. Her dad told us facts about hypnosis. Some nights, we watched movies with her parents, drinking Orange Crush floats and eating spoonfuls of Funfetti frosting from the container. Though we went to the same church, her parents arrived late to Mass and never lectured when we talked about boys. There was an ease to Martha's family that I wanted to slip into. Everyone's legs overlapped on the couch except mine.

Martha had an older sister, Alexandra, who went to college in another state, and I often snuck into Alexandra's room, running my fingers along the spines of her romance novels and peeking inside her closet. She was home for a few weeks in January and drove us around in her car, blasting the radio. I took mental notes on Alexandra's easy laugh and the black eyeliner she wore inside her waterline.

One night, Alexandra took us to a greasy diner near the U of M. Martha and I squished in the backseat with Alexandra's friends, passing frat parties, feeling grown-up. "I'd have sex with a veggie burger right now," Alexandra's friend said, while we pondered the menus. "You couldn't get it away from me."

As I filled my mouth with fries, Alexandra shushed her friends, saying she had something important to tell us.

"Girls, girls, listen closely," Alexandra said to Martha and me. We leaned in as she finished chewing and sipped her chocolate milkshake.

"Here's how you keep guys interested," she said and swallowed again. "Always act like you're going to fuck them—"

My mouth dropped open, and Alexandra's friends erupted in laughter and choking fits.

"—but then never do," Alexandra said, raising her hands to convey the mind-blowingness of her statement. Her friends grinned.

"But won't you eventually have to..." I looked at Martha for support.

"No!" her friends said. "Of course not!"

"Just never get into a bedroom-type situation," Alexandra said, popping a fry into her mouth.

I shifted in the booth with the memory of Jordan kissing me in his empty house. I was relieved to hear these older girls say I didn't have to have sex. Martha's parents were open about sex, but my parents pulled me out of health class and brought me to abstinence lectures. All I knew about sex was that it hurt for girls and was one of the worst sins you could commit.

Alexandra's friends moved on to other topics, comparing opening lines and discussing whether or not they slept in a bra. I listened intently. When the checks came, Martha and I both assumed the older girls would pay for us, then had to scramble to find crumpled bills in our purses when they did not.

I counted the thongs from Charlotte Russe every week when they came out of the dryer, making sure each was accounted for. They lived balled inside a pillowcase in my top dresser drawer. Knowing they were there gave me a sense of security. Hard proof I controlled my life. They allowed me to wear tight pants without lines. They gave me confidence in the locker room when I slipped off my jeans before gym class. I no longer hid in a stall.

But at night, I fretted about how the underwear was my biggest sin. They were the one thing I continued to choose every day even though I knew it was wrong. Every night, I tried to convince myself to get rid of them, reasoning a handful of stretchy fabrics shouldn't be worth an eternity in Hell. But now that I'd experienced the pleasure of having them, I couldn't go back.

One night, I came home from Martha's half an hour late, and in the morning, there was a list of rules taped to my door, typed and printed out: rules for when to do chores, when to come home, when to be in bed, when to be out of bed. Punishments were listed for any "infractions."

"I wanted to make things perfectly clear for you," my dad said when

I came downstairs to make cereal. "Apparently, we haven't been clear enough."

I'm fifteen, but I want to die, I wrote in my journal. *I wish someone would murder me.*

The following Sunday, Martha invited me to her house after Mass. I knew my parents wouldn't allow me to miss family brunch at home, but I stood next to Martha's family in the church atrium, watching my parents socialize and my brothers run around. Martha's mom asked if I was coming with them. I nodded and followed Martha to the parking lot. Martha's parents took us to get gas station coffees, and we combined all the cappuccino flavors. I took my time, adding a little more hazelnut, a little more vanilla, stirring the hot liquid in my Styrofoam cup, not wanting to leave the machine. On the way back to their house, Martha's dad got a call from my dad and turned the car around.

When I walked in the door, my dad seized the coffee and poured it neatly down the sink.

"You don't get to just go wherever you want and do whatever you want," he said.

I fixed my gaze on the drain, the smell of sugary powders and artificial cream rising.

Martha and I watched *Moulin Rouge* (2001) in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. Christian, a humble writer, falls madly in love with Satine, star singer and courtesan at Paris's famous nightclub. I stayed later than I was supposed to, mesmerized by the star-crossed romance.

Satine is the picture of glamor, dangling from wires, red-lipped and corseted, though backstage she coughs up blood. Most Saturdays, Martha and I walked the mall, searching for thirty-dollar foundations and Hollister shirts that would give us the illusion of desirability.

Christian falls in love with Satine the moment he sees her. He belts out his devotion on an elephant-shaped roof. Satine dismisses Christian but, later, returns his affections, though it means losing her dream to become a real actress. "All my life you made me believe I was

only worth what someone would pay for me,” Satine cries to her boss. “But Christian loves me... He loves me. And that is worth everything.”

I wanted to experience the same love that made Satine feel worthy, love that meant she could finally rest from all the costumes and singing. I told my younger sisters about it when I got home, repeating the exact cadences of the lines.

After kissing Jordan, I texted to see if he wanted to hang out after school again, maybe watch more *Gladiator*, but he sent noncommittal responses.

Martha and I hunted for new prospects on Myspace. There was a guy in my new spring semester English class who messaged me occasionally. He was another football player. Also named Jordan. Martha and I clicked through photos of New Jordan playing basketball, zooming in on his butt. “I like him a lot more,” Martha said. He was popular and athletic. I’d even heard other girls describe him as sensitive.

I messaged New Jordan on Wednesday nights when my dad was asleep and my mom was at the adoration chapel. Our conversations made me so giddy, I printed them off to immortalize in my journal. Then we started texting.

Who do you like? New Jordan asked one night.

I’m not telling you, I texted back.

The next day in English, New Jordan kept looking at me across the room. After class, he pulled me aside in the hall and asked who I liked again.

“Okay, don’t laugh,” I said. His face zoomed into focus, and my mouth went dry. “But I kind of like you.”

“Why would I laugh about that?” New Jordan said, cocking his head at me, mouth parted.

Before I could reply, he turned and left. A few minutes later, he texted: *Don’t be so shy!*

I hadn’t been careful enough. I was sitting on my bedroom floor with

notecards and a biology textbook, though I was actually texting New Jordan, when my mom appeared, dangling a red polka-dot thong between two fingers in the doorway. My dad stood next to her.

"I found this on the laundry room floor," my mom said.

For a moment, no one moved. We stared at each other as my mind flitted through possible excuses and tried, with mortification, to figure out if the thong was clean.

I feigned ignorance.

"Is it bad? If it is, I didn't know," I said, making my eyes big.

"It's *very* bad," my mom said and stepped back a little as if she had startled herself.

"I'm so sorry. I totally didn't think about it," I said. "I just saw a sale at the mall and thought 'whatever' because I've seen other girls wearing them in the locker room. I wouldn't have gotten it if I'd known."

My mom and dad glanced at each other as if trying to communicate with their minds. I didn't understand why the underwear was worth getting upset over. It was private. No one saw it under my clothes. Beneath my apologetic expression, my jaw tensed.

They decided my punishment would be to attend confession and adoration with my dad on Saturday morning to ask God for forgiveness. I fought a smile, relieved I was getting off easy. I apologized profusely until my parents left the room, taking the thong with them. I was sad to see a piece from my collection go.

My parents continued talking on the stairs, and I got up to close my door so I could text in peace.

"That's disgusting," my dad said just loud enough so I would hear.

One night, Martha and I raided Alexandra's DVD collection until we found *Cruel Intentions* (1999). Prep school bad boy Sebastian makes a bet to seduce the headmaster's daughter, Annette, after she publishes an article on her choice to remain a virgin.

Sebastian is heartless and conniving. In one scene, he coerces naive Cecile into oral sex, but somehow Martha and I found Sebastian alluring

and Cecile cringey. Boys couldn't control their desires, we thought. It was up to girls to earn kind treatment.

Sebastian takes Annette horseback riding and swims with her naked in the pool. He declares love for Annette and calls her a hypocrite for denying her feelings for him. When Annette relents, Sebastian discovers he's gone weak. He has fallen in love with her.

Annette unbuttons her blouse and sits back on the bed. Sebastian doesn't move. I already fantasized about being able to change guys, like the Jordans, if I was beautiful and charming enough. Sebastian meets Annette at the top of a Subway station elevator, and they kiss to "Colorblind" by Counting Crows. Martha and I were quiet.

I sprawled on Martha's bed and texted New Jordan. By now, I was obsessed with the thought of him. I spent hours analyzing our conversations and clicking through his photos online.

When are we going to meet up? New Jordan asked. *I can't wait to have you to myself.*

I followed Alexandra's advice, making him believe I'd do whatever he wanted. When he asked if I'd give him a blow job, I negotiated the details with Martha so it would seem like I knew what I was talking about. Each time I sent a text, I worried until he responded. It was a miracle every time my phone lit up.

I felt bad, but it was only texting. I shoved away anxieties about sin, my parents finding out, and if I'd actually live up to what I described. Part of me hoped I could get past my nerves about being physical, though I hadn't done anything since the first Jordan probed my mouth with his tongue. But the prospect of meeting was becoming difficult to avoid, and New Jordan only wanted to meet in the middle of the night.

We could meet in the park across from school, he suggested.

Isn't it too cold? It was late March, and the windows rattled with freezing winds.

I'll keep you warm ;), he said.

I lay back on Martha's bed. I had doubts about this plan, but if I

could get him to like me, I could be a good influence. Turn him into someone who'd buy me hot chocolate and kiss me in front of other girls.

My phone vibrated. *Or I could sneak you in my house after everyone's asleep?*

How about tomorrow? I replied and threw my phone to the other side of the room so I couldn't take it back.

Martha came in with popcorn and propped up the laptop for us to watch a movie. I sunk into Martha's shoulder, and Martha's mom tapped on the door to ask if we needed anything. On the ledge, Martha had taped a photo of us from the time we went to her mom's work gala. We'd worn sparkly dresses and her mom said we were the most beautiful people in the room. Suddenly, I felt so warm I could cry.

It was 2 a.m., and I was close to leaving. I did my makeup by the light of my phone screen, spritzed lavender body mist, and ran my hands through my hair.

My phone buzzed. *Are you coming?*

I had my shoes and jacket on, but I putzed with my makeup. I re-straightened a piece of hair. I paced my room for another task. New Jordan's house was only a ten-minute walk, but I was scared to walk alone at this hour. What if the cops caught me breaking city curfew? What if someone messed with me on the street? What if my parents found out? What if I committed sins?

My parents are still awake, I texted New Jordan. The house was brutally still. *There's no way I can sneak out without them knowing.*

NO please come! New Jordan said. *If we don't do it tonight, it won't happen for a REALLY LONG TIME.*

I'm sorry. I wrote. Then I took a chance. *Even if I could go, I don't know if I'm that type of girl.*

Then who are you? he responded. *The shy girl who never does anything?*

That cut deep. He kept texting, but I squeezed my eyes shut on the bed. In the morning, I woke up fully clothed with contacts cemented to my eyeballs. I rushed into English class late. The whole hour, New

Jordan stared straight through me from across the room. No amount of staring back made him budge.

Alexandra visited home one weekend, and we watched *Repo! The Genetic Opera* (2008). The movie takes place in a dystopian future in which the demand for costly organ transplants means legalized murder of those who can't make their payments.

Repo Man steals a beating heart from a woman's chest and leaves her body splayed on the pavement. I covered my eyes at the guts, while Alexandra laughed and said it was unrealistic. "Look, that kidney has a barcode!" she said. Martha and Alexandra sang along to the soundtrack.

"Pay attention, this part is important," Martha said, and I refocused on the movie long enough to realize I sympathized with the main character. Shilo is sequestered in her bedroom with an incurable blood disease and her father controlling her life. One night, she sneaks out and learns about the horrors of Repo Man and that her father was intentionally keeping her sick. He thought keeping her in her room would protect her from the outside world.

I didn't understand how Shilo was so brave. All my parents' rules and religious teachings kept me immobilized, sick. Even watching this movie—with violence, drugs, and sex—was a rebellion. I longed to leave the dark room, but I was afraid to find out what was outside.

One night, my parents banged on my door. Their faces were red, veins popping. My mom said she had gotten a call from "a concerned parent," saying I'd gone over to a boy's house alone.

"They said you kissed him and everything!" Her horrified tone made me cringe.

"What are you talking about?" I kept my voice calm and knitted my brow. I had almost forgotten about the first Jordan from months ago and didn't know who'd tell on me, though I'd recounted the story to a number of people. One girl at youth group had said it was "actually hilarious," and I thought she misunderstood something in my telling of it.

I asked who called and what, exactly, they said, but my mom wouldn't give more information.

"Why would someone say all this if it wasn't true?" my dad said. My parents stood tall and awkward on the carpet next to my yellow painted dresser. They had no other evidence, I realized, and I felt the power shift in my favor.

"All I know is I would never do that." If my parents wanted to blame me, they would need proof. "It's probably catty girls spreading rumors at school. Martha told me people were saying stuff about her too." I tried to look upset.

My dad looked at my mom, still scowling. "That's true. Girls spread rumors all the time."

It was a close call.

Heart pounding, I deleted all my texts from both of the Jordans, even the most-treasured ones I saved in a folder to reread when I wanted to feel something. I called Martha, but she didn't answer. I wanted reassurance I had done what needed to be done. It seemed almost psychopathic how easily I thought of the lie. Was I losing my soul? I filled pages of my journal with the same line: *Father, forgive me for I have sinned.*

In late spring, I told Martha she should shadow me. She had another high school picked out for fall, but it was a good excuse to spend a school day together. "It'll be fun!" I said. "I can show you the people I've been telling you about all year."

She agreed and picked a date to get out of school. By then, I'd mostly given up on boys and trying to make friends. I talked to some kids from speech team or marching band, kids who were nice but existed on a lower social plane than I thought beneficial for me. Still, I looked forward to dragging Martha along and pointing out the two Jordans in the flesh. We planned our outfits for the occasion, Martha in a matching sweat suit and me in a graphic T-shirt and jeans.

Martha stood by my locker and followed me to my classes. At first,

we giggled at the novelty of being at school together, but it quickly became less fun. It was still school. I pointed out New Jordan across the English classroom, but Martha didn't seem impressed.

After lunch, we sat in swivel chairs in the computer lab for my keyboarding class. I usually spent the hour writing notes to myself in my Yahoo account, but that day Martha and I chatted all period, ignoring the teacher's attempts to make us type. Martha fussed with her hair and said she didn't like how she looked.

"It's okay, you're with me," I reassured her.

"That's not saying much," she responded.

I thought I'd misheard, but she said it again more clearly.

"That's not saying *much*."

We weren't always nice to each other, in the same way we weren't always nice to members of our immediate family. We yelled at each other over voicemail and borrowed clothes without asking. But this was the first time she'd made me feel like a loser. Now that she saw my daily life, it was finally clear how much more I needed her than she needed me. I needed her older sister, her movies, her input about boys. I needed her mom to drive me to the mall. What did she need from me?

"Is this really your day?" she asked, turning her head like she must be missing something. I stared into the navy carpet and regretted bringing her here. "This is it?" she said again, gesturing with a limp hand.

In June, I went to the beach with Martha for her birthday. We gossiped on beach towels, facing the overgrown lake from our small patch of sand. "Ew," Martha said when she saw lotion on my leg that wasn't fully rubbed in. I stopped smiling and angled my body the other direction.

The sky was overcast, and the water smelled like goose poop. Martha and I switched to our stomachs as the clouds shifted, hoping for sun. Since the afternoon in the computer lab, it seemed we'd taken our friendship as far as it could go.

Martha's parents set cake and ice cream on a picnic table, and we gathered to watch Martha blow out the candles. Afterward, we swung

on the swings until it got dark. That day, my skin happened to be clear. I swung higher and imagined being a person who would never come to a beach like this, too good for the stink of it. I'd have the perfect jeans and lip gloss and push-up bra, and my hair wouldn't fluff up. Someday, I'd be a person who didn't imagine being anyone else.