

One

IT WAS AMAZING HOW QUICKLY THINGS could change.

It was only six months ago that I thought I was in love with one of my closest friends since birth.

Five months since I had my heart trounced on by the lying, cheating dirtbag.

Four months since I started The Lonely Hearts Club as its sole member.

Which means four months since everything changed.

I went from someone with a small handful of close friends to a person with nearly thirty girls who would have my back if I ever needed them (which I often did). There were some people who looked up to me because I stood up for my friends and myself. And, of course, that also meant I was openly ridiculed by other people for going against the grain.

It was all worth it.

And now it had been one month since I'd started dating Ryan. Well, technically, twenty-two days since our first date — not like I was counting or anything. (Okay, I kind of was.)

While I knew that no two relationships were ever the same, I hadn't realized, at first, how different Ryan was from every other guy I'd dated. Although in hindsight, what I had with those guys (more like immature little boys) couldn't really be

called *relationships*. There were trips to the movies and pizzas eaten, but that was about it. It was more about having someone to walk down the hallways with, someone to eat lunch with, someone to kill time with after school. Insecurity blankets. None of it ever felt real.

Being with Ryan was different. I wanted to be with Ryan because of who he was, not because he was a boyfriend. And Ryan wanted to be with me for me, not because there was a vacancy for the role of Ryan Bauer's Girlfriend. We liked spending time with each other. It was mutual.

Well, maybe not *everything* was entirely mutual . . .

"Come on, Penny, it's not a big deal." Ryan reached out his hand impatiently. "All couples do it."

While I didn't have as much experience being in a relationship as Ryan, I knew I wasn't overreacting.

Ryan was wrong.

This was a big step.

One that I wasn't sure I was ready for.

Maybe other couples did it all the time, but I wasn't prepared to make such a commitment so soon. We'd only been going out for a few weeks. I didn't want to rush into anything.

There were certain things you couldn't take back.

A smile slowly crept over his face, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "Okay, I know how to convince you."

He stepped a few inches away from me as if he needed lots of space for whatever he was preparing to do. He cleared his

throat, gave me one more crooked grin before he started clapping rhythmically. *Clap, clap. Clap. Clap, clap. Clap.*

Then in front of the entire food court at the mall, Ryan began singing at the top of his lungs, “*Oh yeah, I’ll tell you something, I think you’ll understand . . .*” People began to look over to where we were standing, but Ryan was undeterred. He continued to sing even though he had proven on more than one occasion that he couldn’t carry a tune. Sure he was everything a girl could want in a guy — but he was also apparently incapable of being embarrassed.

I, on the other hand, wanted to hide behind the mall directory so no one could see my flaming-red face. I knew there was only one way to get him to stop.

“Fine!” I relented. I grabbed his hand and entwined our fingers. “Happy?”

He was grinning ear to ear. “Yes, very happy. Oh, how I love the Beatles.”

“Yeah, they’d be so proud.” I began to drag him away from the scene of the musical crime. There was no point in telling him that the Beatles hadn’t gotten him his way — it was my fear of causing a scene that made me cave. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to hold Ryan’s hand . . . but being out in the open as a couple felt too exposed.

Only a few short weeks ago, I’d been the one telling girls not to date, that all guys were lying, cheating scum of the earth. And while some of them were (hello, dirtbag Nate Taylor), Ryan was wonderful. Public embarrassments aside.

The Lonely Hearts Club had caused such a ruckus at McKinley High that I didn't want it to appear that I was backing down by being with Ryan. The Club was the best thing that had happened to me in high school, and I didn't want anything to mess that up. And I was well aware of how much a guy could mess things up.

We turned the corner to head up the escalators to the movie theater, when I spotted a few of my fellow Lonely Hearts Club members coming down.

"Pen!" Tracy waved at us, and Jen and Morgan perked up behind her.

I instinctively let go of Ryan's hand as they made their way over to us.

"Hey." Tracy hugged me, and her dirty-blond ponytail lightly brushed my cheek. She then turned to Ryan. "Bauer," she said solemnly.

"How're you doing, Tracy?" he said cheerfully, clearly wanting to get in good with my best friend. He already had her approval — she was partially responsible for us finally getting together — but with Tracy you wanted to get as far on her good side as possible.

Tracy made a show of looking him up and down. "I'm doing great, *obvs*. Got my girls, saw a movie, not dealing with *the man*. What could possibly be better?"

"Ah . . ." Ryan had no idea what to say next.

I interceded. "What are you guys up to now? Ryan and I were just . . . um, I saw him —" I stopped myself, not quite believing

that I'd been about to make up a story of why Ryan and I were together. I didn't know why I felt like I had to watch what I was saying. These girls were practically my family, and I'd known Ryan for years. I should've been comfortable having us all be together, but I wasn't used to being The Girl Who Now Dates, especially with the girls I'd spent nearly every Saturday last semester with, comparing notes on the evil things guys could do.

"I'll tell you what we're up to." Jen patted her stomach. "Food. Lots of food."

Tracy could sense I was uncomfortable. She tilted her head slightly. "Well, we should get going — there's a cinnamon bun with my name on it somewhere in the vicinity. Have fun . . . but not *too much* fun."

"Oh, we won't," I promised her. Ryan poked my side in protest. "How could anybody have fun without you around?"

"Exactly!" Tracy replied. "See, Pen, you get me. You. Get. Me." She pounded her fist lightly against her chest. The group started walking away, but Tracy stood her ground. "Remember, Bauer." She held up two fingers to her eyes, then turned them on Ryan. "I've got my eyes on you." She laughed maniacally while linking arms with Jen and Morgan as the three of them walked away.

"You know she's only teasing," I reminded Ryan.

He ran his fingers through his dark wavy hair. "Yeah, I know. Usually, guys have to worry about making a good impression on their girlfriends' parents, but I've also got to get the blessing of over twenty girls. No pressure."

He used the word *girlfriend* with such ease, as though it was completely clear what we were doing.

It wasn't quite as clear to me. But at the same time, I liked that he used the word without hesitation, unafraid to commit to me.

I grabbed his hand again as we got on the escalator. "Come on, the Club loves you," I assured him. "You know how happy they were when we started dating."

"Yeah, I do," he replied with a gentle squeeze of my hand. "And for your information, my mom's thrilled we're together because it means she has an automatic babysitter on Saturday."

One of the rules of the Club was that we had to have our meetings on Saturday nights, which wasn't really a big deal. Ryan and I would go out on Fridays — and sometimes we spent Sundays together if the Club wasn't up to anything. Neither of us minded.

Tracy's laugh echoed up the escalators. I looked back and saw them all giggling at something.

Ryan studied my face as I watched my friends go off without me.

"Do you want to go hang out with them?" he asked.

"No, it's fine." Although I had to admit I felt a slight sting that I hadn't been included in their girls' day out.

He wrapped his arm around me as we stepped off the escalator. "You're a horrible liar."

"I am?" I leaned into him. "Hey, Ryan?"

"Yes, Miss Penny Lane?"

I exaggeratedly batted my eyelashes at him. “You’re a really good singer.”

He tickled my stomach, which caused me to respond with a loud shriek. A couple walking in front of us turned around. Before I could protest further, Ryan pulled me in tight and kissed me on the forehead.

Instead of pulling away like I had before, I leaned in even closer. Despite my pangs of jealousy, I knew that I needed to focus more on the here and now. And right there and then, I knew there was nowhere else I wanted to be, and no one else I wanted to spend my Sunday with.