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Losing It

Written by Emma Rathbone

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Losing It

Emma Rathbone

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For Adam

This is the heat that seeks the flaw in everything
and loves the flaw.
Nothing is heavier than its spirit,
nothing more landlocked than the body within it.

—Jorie Graham, "Tennessee June"

Losing It

One

I sat at my desk and stared at a calendar with a bunch of dancing tamales on it and played with a little piece of paper and thought about the fact that I was twenty-six and still a virgin. There was that, and then there was the fact that I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Chelsea Maitland. She was my first friend to lose her virginity. She was fifteen. She told me about it one afternoon on her parents' remodeled back deck after school. The railings were made of a bright white vinyl material that hurt my eyes. It was when she'd gone to visit her sister at college, she said. They'd gone to a frat party, and there was a guy there who had been a counselor at a summer camp she'd gone to. She'd always had a crush on him, and they ended up getting drunk and walking to a lake together and one thing led to another.

"How did it feel?" I asked. I focused on a laid-back ceramic frog with an outdoor thermometer in it. We lived in San Antonio, that's where I grew up, and fixtures like this were common. "I couldn't say," said Chelsea, with a little smile, her face folded and smug, like

she was in possession of a secret I couldn't possibly fathom, and she had to crowd around it and protect it. Chelsea Maitland of all people. We'd been friends for almost eight years, since we were kids, but the implication beneath our friendship had always been that *I* was the special one. That I would always be the one to get the thing.

The phone on my desk rang. It was my boss.

"Hi, Julia," she said. "Can you meet me for a quick chat? Sorry, are you in the middle of anything?"

"Oh, no, no," I said. And then, before I could stop myself, "I was just staring at a calendar with tamales on it. That someone left here. I think. It's not mine."

There was a pause. "See you in ten?"

"Sure!" I said.

I shoved the calendar into a drawer and brushed off my desk and picked up and stared into my pen jar and put it back and just kept sitting there like that.

Then there was Heidi Beasley. We all found out at a sleepover when we were sixteen, on a rare weekend I wasn't away at a swim meet, that she had lost her virginity. What was it about her? I thought later, curled in my sleeping bag, staring at a wooden sign that read "Heidi's Bistro" in their finished basement. I'd known her forever, too. I remembered one afternoon in the activity room of a church—this was when my parents were going through their Chris-

tian phase—she'd cried because she was trying to thread a bunch of jelly beans into a necklace and they'd all fallen apart. And now her face was always soft with daydreams and she would thoughtfully chew the end of a lock of hair and stare into the distance. I'm sixteen, I thought at the time. It wouldn't be long before it was my turn.

I swiveled around and looked outside. I was on the twelfth floor of a glass building in a new development called Weston Corner in a nondescript suburb of Washington, D.C. I had a view of the plaza below where there was a fountain surrounded by large concrete planters, all deserted now because it was raining. A sandwich board fell over in the wind. In the distance was a half-completed hotel, and then beyond that, fields, nothing.

Danielle Crenshaw. She was on my high-school swim team and so we were at a lot of meets together. One afternoon we're all lingering, taking longer than usual. She's in purple leggings and a big floppy sweater and she's doing her favorite thing, which is to show off her sex moves via a little hip-hop dance. "Ya gotta get down on it," she said, rolling her chest forward and squatting. "Ya gotta get down on it." Everybody shrieked with laughter, including me, but really I was marveling at her authority with the subject matter. To have gotten down on it so many times that you could confidently riff on it like that without being afraid anyone would doubt your experience.

"Julia, I'm glad you stopped by," said my boss, Jodie. Her blond hair was pulled back into a burst of curls. Her desk was covered with papers and envelopes. She slammed her palm down as if they were all going to slide to the floor.

"Yup," I said, sitting down across from her. "Well, you asked me to." She shot me a look so I said, quickly, "I like it," and pointed at a decorative chunk of quartz on her desk.

She rolled her eyes. "Not my idea. But thanks."

Her phone rang. "Hold on," she said, and answered it. Sometimes Jodie could seem so distracted it was like all her features were swimming away from one another. I stared at a lipstick-stained coffee mug. "Quartz Consulting," it read in a casual handwriting font.

She put down the phone, laced her fingers together, and leaned forward. "The reason I asked you here—have you looked at *Education Today* lately?"

"Ha," I said. "Yeah." I thought she was joking. *Education Today* was the company's blog, and it was my whole job to run it and update it. I was supposed to comb the Internet for articles on higher education and trends in online courses, and then re-post them with the author's permission.

"I'm serious," she said. "Have you looked at it? Like a casual viewer?"

"Yes." I shifted in my seat. "Definitely, sure."

"Because on Monday you posted an article extolling the benefits of one of our main competitors."

"Oh my gosh!" I said, as if we were gossiping.

Her smile hardened.

"And I noticed the posts have been lagging," she said. "You've only put up two things this week."

"That's right." I cleared my throat. "It's been sort of a slow week in education news, so I thought I'd kind of see what happened and catch up towards the end."

"I guess I'm just wondering if there's anything you need to work at a slightly faster clip."

"Sure, yeah," I said, nodding quickly. "No, I'm fine. Just a little behind."

She leaned forward and rested her head on her palm and squinted at me. She smiled a searching smile.

I smiled, too, and raised my eyebrows, and recrossed my legs.

She stayed like that and held the silence and I was right about to point to a small decorative watering can on her desk when she finally said, "One more thing."

"Sure!"

"How's the Yacoma spreadsheet coming along?"

"It's getting there," I said.

"You must be, what, halfway through?" she said. "Three-quarters?"

"Yes," I said.

The Yacoma spreadsheet was a mountainous data-entry project where I had to enter payment information for every one of our hundreds of authors, going back six years. I'd barely started it.

"Great," she said. "Because Chris is going to be needing that pretty soon for the audit."

"Right, of course," I said.

"Glad you're on it," she said.

"Yup," I said. "I am."

"Good."

Back at my desk I sat down and looked around. Everything had a matte gleam—my chair, my computer, the door, the desk, the building itself. Someone's ringtone went off down the hall.

Senior year, there was Kimmy Fitzgerald. People liked Kimmy because she was nice to everyone. She always wore a winter coat that she allowed her grandmother to sew little bits of fabric onto, so that it made a kind of hideous patchwork, and she somehow got away with this due to a grave, dreamy manner that repelled criticism because you could tell on some innate level that she wouldn't care what anyone said.

One night a group of us girls were at an all-night Greek diner that people from our high school often went to. We were talking and picking at waffles and drinking coffee. At the booth next to us was a group of boys from another school being loud and stealing looks at us. We made a show of ignoring them. One was wearing a boxy black button-down shirt, like a waiter would wear, and had greasy blond hair, and a broad face with wire glasses that were too small. On first glance he looked pinched and insolent, like a bully. But then when we were leaving the diner, out in the parking lot, this same guy came up to us. His friends were hanging back, embarrassed, as he got down on one knee and presented to Kimmy a flower he'd made out of the paper place mat. "A rose for a rose, m'lady?" he said.

We all laughed in a mean, choppy way and rolled our eyes,

although you could see—in that gesture, where he was putting everything to the front, you could see the way he was brave and openhearted, even though he wasn't handsome or wearing the right clothes. Any one of us would have ignored him, but Kimmy didn't. She saw the happiness that was leaping out at her, and she took it. She stepped forward and, to everyone's surprise, said, "Why, thank you."

They started seeing each other, and sleeping together pretty soon after that. He came to the science fair at our high school and they both sat in front of her project, which was a display of little bits of charred carpet. They drew doodles and played with a calculator and laughed. He became more handsome, like you could see the best version of him because of her.

I opened a drawer and took out a pencil and started scribbling on a Post-it note, trying to see how dark I could make it. Jessica Seever came in and poured herself into the chair across from me. She worked at the front desk and was my only friend at the office. "Crazy night," she said, referring to the previous evening. We'd gone to a bar together and sat in uncomfortable silence until her new boyfriend showed up. Then they'd had a theatrical fight that they both seemed to enjoy.

"Kidman *does* like you," she said. Kidman was her boyfriend.

"Okay," I said nonchalantly, "sure." I opened a folder on my computer, suddenly finding, with Jessica's presence, the will to work on the spreadsheet.

"I'm actually—" I pointed at the screen with my pencil.

"Things just got a little out of hand," she said, proud of herself.

"Uh-huh."

"Look, it was me." She put her hand on her chest. "I started it. I always do! It's like Kidman says, I get some tequila in me, I go crazy."

"Right," I said.

"He's like, 'You're crazy, girl!'"

The first time we'd met, Kidman had barely acknowledged me, and then spent the whole night flirting with Jessica and looking around like he was really restless. Jessica and I were friends due to the fact that we were both unmarried and roughly the same age and had immediately established a mutual dislike of squirt-out hand sanitizer, which had not, in the end, reaped the conversational dividends I had hoped for. We spent a lot of time together poking at our drinks with our straws. She liked to say things and then gauge my reaction for approval or admiration.

"You know what they say," she said, tracing the arm of her chair. "Make-up sex is the best."

Her eyes roamed over my face. "Totally," I said.

"After you left we went out to his friend's apartment complex—have you ever done it in a pool?"

"Yes," I said. "A bunch of times."

In about four hours I would go back home to my apartment, microwave a dinner that would burn the top of my mouth, then float facedown on the Internet for a while before going to bed even though I wasn't tired.

"We were, like, up against one of those, like, floating things, with the tube? It was shaped like a turtle?"

"A pool cleaner?" I said.

"I guess. But he was behind me, and I was holding on to a ledge. We were in that position? And it kept bumping into his back and he was like, 'Get it away!' and I was like, 'Threesome!' And he was like, 'You are so bad.'"

"Yikes," I said to Jessica, trying to muster the same wry glint in my eyes.

At the science fair, Kimmy and Jason had touched each other with total ownership, like it was just a given that they had access to each other all the time. At one point I saw him lift her hand and place it in his palm and study it like it was a precious jewel. I'd never had anything like that. I'd graduated from high school, gone to college, graduated, gotten my first job, and I'd still never had anything like that. Not even close.

"So good," said Jessica. "So hot." She looked at me for a reaction.

I swiveled around and stared at the empty town center. Sometimes, thinking about those two—Kimmy and Jason—I felt a sense of loss in my own life so drastic it was like the wind was knocked out of me.

"You want to come out tonight?" said Jessica. "We're going to this new place."

"No," I said quietly. I turned back around. It's funny how a decision you've been making in difficult increments can suddenly seem like the simplest thing in the world. "I'm leaving."

"What?" She looked at me, perhaps for the first time, with genuine interest.

"I'm quitting," I said. "I'm quitting this afternoon."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Awwww," she said, staring at her fingernails, a million miles away.

It hadn't always been like this. Before I got the job at Quartz, before I moved from the Southwest to the East Coast, into an apartment complex that was next to a glinting four-lane highway and had a view of a storage center, before all that I'd been a competitive swimmer. I'd started at the age of twelve, when my mom signed me up at the pool so I'd have something to do while she was at her GRE prep, and I immediately found I had a knack. I remember thinking, This is all you have to do? Just try to keep pushing as hard as you can against the water? Stretch your arm farther than you did the last time and keep doing that? I kept going because I was encouraged and because I became addicted to the approval I saw in the eyes of my coach. I had an instinct, too, that I noticed others didn't have: how to time your first kick after a turn, the arc you sculpt with your hands in the water to get the most pull, minor adjustments that give you just enough of an advantage. I just knew what to do and it felt good.

By the time I was thirteen I was a two-time record setter at the Junior Nationals. I went on to get second and third place for the backstroke at the Nationals in consecutive years. I competed internationally, and when I was only sixteen years old I was ranked sixth in the 100-meter breaststroke at the World Championship Trials in Buffalo. Do you know what that's like? To be sixth best at something in the whole world? I'd lie in bed and think about it. Sixth.

The sixth fastest female swimmer under the age of eighteen. When you took into account the caprice of fate, the random way things jumbled and settled, couldn't sixth, in another variation of the universe with slightly reassembled factors, have been first? Maybe I could have ranked higher—if it wasn't for a kink in my shoulder, and a determination that unexpectedly caved in, one regular morning at college.

It was a Wednesday my junior year at Arizona State, where I was on a full athletic scholarship. I was sitting on the bench, waiting for Coach Serena to write the day's practice sets. I had a queasy-sick feeling from being up so early, something I'd experienced since high school and never been able to overcome. I was in a daze, licking my thumb, staring at the way my thighs pooled on the wooden bench. My shoulder had been clicking. It was a small feeling, something minutely out of place when I brought my arm above my head. I thought it had to do with the angle of my palm in the water and so that week I'd been trying to adjust my stroke. Candace Lancaster was next to me, her head between her legs. I looked at a poster ("LET THEM EAT WAKE") on the wall of the pool room and contemplated whether I should stop by the cafeteria on the way back to my dorm after practice. A few of the other girls walked in from the locker room. There was bulimic Erin Sayers from New Mexico. There was snake-tattoo Kelly from Pennsylvania, and then behind them was someone I'd never seen. She was tall but she looked so young—like a middle-schooler. We made quick eye contact and then she stared aloofly at her nails.

Her name was Stephanie Garcia, and she was a backstroker, like me. I'd worked hard to establish myself on the team, to make my-

self indispensable. I couldn't believe it when, five minutes later, she surged by in the lane next to me with what seemed like appalling ease. She was like an engine running on cool, mean energy that would never be depleted, a new model that makes you see all the clunky proportions and pulled-out wires of everything else. I tried to catch up, I really tried, but I couldn't.

Five hours a day, six days a week, gouging it out in the hours before school started; the cracked hands, the chlorine hair, the shivering bus rides and random hotel rooms, the fees, the dogged effort of my parents, the year I didn't menstruate, all of it to just be really, really, really good at one thing. And then someone strides in with a kind of poured-gold natural ability; someone who hits the clean, high note you've been struggling for with an almost resentful nonchalance, and the game is over.

You could feel the coaches, even that morning, readjusting their focus, reassembling the team in their minds. I could see how it would all play out—how hard I would have to work, how many more hours I would have to put in, just to maintain my place. Older, shorter, I would never be as good as her. Plus there was my shoulder. I'd been ignoring it, but it was there—a light popping that couldn't be worked out—a button caught somewhere in the works. It would only get worse.

Mentally, I quit that morning. A part of me wondered if I'd been secretly waiting for something like this to happen, or if I wasn't as determined as I always thought I'd been. But it wasn't that. It was an immediate understanding of what was now before me. A lifetime of knowledge and observation served me in one life-changing