

# One

WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, I walked down the aisle with the man of my dreams.

Okay, make that *boy*. He was five, too.

I'd known Nate Taylor pretty much since birth. Our fathers had been friends since childhood, and every year, Nate and his parents would spend the summer with my family. My baby book was filled with pictures of me and Nate — taking a bath together as infants, playing in our tree house in the backyard, and — my favorite — dressed up as a miniature bride and groom at my cousin's wedding. (Soon after, the picture of me in my white dress and Nate in his tux was hung proudly on my bedroom wall.)

Everybody always joked that one day we'd get married for real. Nate and I used to think so, too. We thought we were the perfect couple. I didn't mind playing war with him, and he would even play with my dolls (although he'd never admit it). He'd push me on the swings and I'd help him organize his action figures. He thought I looked pretty with my hair in pigtails, and I thought he was cute (even during his brief pudgy stage). I liked his parents, and he liked my parents. I wanted an English Bulldog, and he wanted a Pug. Macaroni and cheese was my favorite food, and it was his favorite food, too.

What else could a girl want in a guy?

To me, looking forward to summer was the same thing as looking forward to Nate. As a result, so many of my memories revolved around him:

♥ My first kiss (in my tree house when we were eight; I punched him, then cried afterward).

♥ The first time I held hands (when we got lost during a third-grade scavenger hunt).

♥ My first Valentine's Day card (a red construction-paper heart with my name on it).

♥ My first camping trip (Nate and I put up a tent in our backyard when we were ten and spent the entire night out there by ourselves).

♥ The first time I purposely deceived my parents (I took the train into Chicago by myself to see Nate last year; I told my parents I was spending the night at my best friend Tracy's).

♥ Our first *true* kiss (fourteen; this time I didn't put up a fight).

After that kiss, my anticipation for summer intensified. We weren't playing make-believe anymore. The feelings were real, they were different. The heart involved wasn't made from construction paper — it was living, beating . . . real.

When I thought about summer, I thought about Nate. When I thought about love, I thought about Nate. When I thought about anything, I thought about Nate.

I knew that this summer it would happen. Nate and I would be together.

The last month of school was unbearable. I started a count-down clock to his arrival. I took shopping trips with my friends to buy “Nate clothes.” I even bought my first bikini with him in mind. I set my work schedule at my dad’s dental office around Nate’s work schedule at the country club. I didn’t want anything to get in our way.

And then it happened.

He was here.

He was taller.

He was older.

He was no longer cute — he was *sexy*.

And he was mine.

He wanted me. And I wanted him. It seemed that simple.

Soon enough, we were together. Finally, really together.

Only I didn’t get the fairy tale I was hoping for.

Because guys change.

They lie.

They stomp on your heart.

I found out the hard way that fairy tales and true love don’t exist.

The perfect guy doesn’t exist.

And that adorable picture of the innocent miniature bride with the guy who would one day break her heart?

That didn’t exist anymore, either.

I watched it burn in flames.