

Jenna Allie

## LOVE HURTS



If I went there a second time, he would have told me I was beautiful. I would have looked at my shoes, investigating every scuff on their black surface. He would have insisted we trade sweatshirts and later used that as an excuse to see me again.

If I went there a third time, he would have held my hand. We would have walked along the uneven sidewalks of the small town where we both grew up. He would have talked of college and of his future; I would have pretended to understand things beyond my years. If he tucked a long, brown curl behind my ear and whispered, "I think I finally feel something real," his touch would have sent a tremble through my stomach.

If curiosity led me there again, he would have met me beneath the cherry trees that lined the streets. I would have blushed when he told me he wrote me a letter and believed him when he said he'd forgotten it at home. He would have told me he'd bring it next time. He would have known there'd be a next time, and when it came there would be no letter. He would have shown up late, an hour past fashionable. I would have waited to hear a knock on the front door of my parents' house.

If I let him into my home, my mother would have worn her nervous smile. My brother would have glared at him in silence and my father would have talked to him, privately. I would have ignored my father during the entire dinner while my

mom tried to make small talk. My brother would have refused to eat with us.

If defiance drove me there a sixth time, he would have tried to kiss me and I would have leaned in liked I'd seen people do in sappy love films. I would have been too young to know that if love looks like a movie, there's something terribly wrong with it.

If I went there a seventh time I would have returned an eighth, a ninth. If desire drove me back a tenth time, we would have lain beneath the twisted sheets in his twin-sized bed. The sun would have fooled me into thinking his eyes softened when he said, "I love you."

If love lured me back a twentieth time, it surely would have drawn me there a thirtieth. I would have heard rumors in the days in between. The small town would have started to whisper of him with another her.

If anger pulled me there a thirty-first time, I would have confronted him.

"Just tell me the truth. I won't get mad at the truth."

"How could you believe them over me? There's no point in me saying anything — you've clearly made up your mind."

"I just want the truth."

"You're the only one, that's the truth."

His eyes would flicker, and if I mistook this as reason for hope, hope itself would have sucked me back a fortieth time. We'd continue to fight, too loud and in love to hear ourselves.

"She kissed me!"

"That's such bullshit and you know it."

"Fine. Then just leave, like everyone else. If you really loved me you'd believe me."

If desperation dragged me there a fiftieth time, he would have told me to change before dinner because my dress was too tight. I would have wriggled out of it like a snake shedding its skin and slipped into something that hid my newly formed curves. If we went to a nice place in town, he would have forgotten his wallet, again. I would have paid the check.

If shame drew me there a seventieth time, he'd have caught me flirting with another guy and dragged me away from the party. The stereo in his car would have throbbed as he sped,

spewing rage, down the dimly lit roads. If I shouted back, he would have slammed on the brakes. I would have shoved him into the window. He would have split my lower lip.

If I crawled back again, he would have seen me with sober eyes. He would have noticed the bruises blossoming on my face and tried to kiss the blood back into my body, swearing never to let this happen again.

If I came back a hundredth time he would have learned not to bruise the face but only the skin that could be hidden under baggy sweatshirts. I would have learned how to throw a punch.

If fear kept me frozen there, a year would have passed. Bones would have snapped and questions would have been asked. I would have had excuses tattooed onto my tongue. They would have been met with dumbfounded silence, the thick cloud of denial that hangs between people who know better than to speak.

If compulsion pulled me there just one more time, I would have woken up to my mother's tears and my father's silent stare. If, hours after my parents had left for the night, I asked the nurse in delirium, "Why does this hurt?" she would have said, "Love hurts, kid."

If I went back just to say goodbye, I would have stayed two more years. I would have stayed until my heart couldn't catch up to the blood loss, until the fluttering in my stomach was so violent that love and sickness didn't feel a whole lot different. If I went there just one more time, I would have died.

So I went there a second time and he told me I was beautiful.

I didn't blush and I have no idea what shoes I was wearing because I wasn't looking at them. I was looking at him. At his eyes. They were brown.

I said, "I know."

We never spoke again.