

Alpha Girl
By Kate Bloomfield

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A gift to you: The first 8 chapters of 'Alpha Girl' the new Paranormal Romance
by young adult author, Kate Bloomfield.

Unedited Version

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Chapter one

My parents would describe me as a happy child; playful and energetic like most children. I had friends, was invited to parties, and I did well in school. Overall, I was an extremely pleasant person to be around.

That was, however, until something terrible happened to me that changed my life forever.

It all started when I was nine years old and I was attacked while hiking in the woods with my parents. No one knew what it was at the time, but it left deep scratch wounds in my left calf, and teeth marks over my ribs.

It was after the attack I was considered a strange child. I barely spoke, and was disinterested in other people and their lives. I felt disconnected from the world as though I didn't belong. Perhaps I was crazy.

Soon I noticed animals behaving strangely around me, as though they were frightened. Even our dog Rocky wouldn't come near me after the attack. It was as if he could sense that I was damaged on the inside; scarred internally.

This was when my family started to fall apart.

These days my parents are far too busy with their own lives to pay much attention what I get up to. They're either working, or having affairs. Perhaps the stress of my attack was too much for them, and they began to drift apart.

I barely talk to them anymore; once a month, if I'm lucky.

You see, after my attack, I became a sickly child. Every month, without fail, I would be bedridden for a couple of days at a time. Because of this my schoolwork suffered.

Oh, I forgot to introduce myself.

My name is Rose Goldman and I am seventeen years old. I live in a small town called Halfway, which is popular with tourists for the great hiking and fishing spots nearby; things I have no interest in. Not anymore, anyway.

Halfway was named so because it is exactly halfway between destinations; that little blip on the map where you stop to fill your car with gas, go for a hike, or have a picnic, but never stay too long.

My mother works in pharmaceuticals, an extremely boring career which I have no desire to join. My father has an equally tedious job as a project manager for a local building company.

Over the years I have become better at talking to people, and interacting with other students. I am still considered strange by my classmates, but at least there are a few girls who allow me to sit with them during the lunch hour. I've become very good at hiding my oddness.

I suppose the real story begins on the first day of the new school year.

Tuesday - 21 days to go

'Hey Rose,' my 'friend' Sadie said, sitting adjacent to me.

'Hi,' I responded, without looking up from my book. I was a big reader. Books allowed me to escape from the hell that was my life.

'Amy said we've got a new English teacher,' said Sadie, pulling out her pencil case and placing it on the desk.

I groaned. Having a new teacher meant the class would be rowdy and intolerable. It was a right of passage. Students would act up until the teacher had earned enough reputation points to control the students. It was a bit like jail in a way. The longer you're teaching at the school, the more respected you are. This new teacher was going to have a very hard time controlling a group of seventeen year olds.

The new teacher entered the classroom at that moment and turned to the board. Instantly, an amazing smell reached my nostrils. It was sweet like cinnamon, yet musky. Perhaps it was his cologne.

No one ceased talking as he wrote his name in large white letters; everyone continued as they were, sitting on desks, laughing and chatting. I didn't even bother looking up from the book I was reading.

'Good morning everyone!' he called over the chatter. No one paid him any attention. I felt sorry for him, but continued reading my book anyway.

‘Can everyone take their seats please?’ he tried.

No one moved. If anything, the volume of chatter increased.

Crack!

Everyone jumped a foot in the air as the new teacher slammed his ruler across the desk. We all stared, wide eyed.

‘Now that I have your attention,’ he smiled politely, ‘would you please take your seats?’

Every student did as they were told, throwing the teacher dark looks.

‘Welcome! My name is Mr. Stone. Not *Mr. Stoner*, or any other nickname you come up with, all right?’

Mr. Stone looked to be in his late twenties, or perhaps his early thirties, with a dusting of grey in his brown hair, as though years of hard work and stress had aged him prematurely. His eyes were a deep forest green, accompanied by crow’s feet, which wrinkled as he beamed at the class. He wore a tweed suit that was a little too short around the cuffs, as though it was tailored for someone other than him. It looked like the sort of thing you picked up at a thrift-store.

‘Now, it’s my first time at this school, so I’m hoping we can lay off the practical jokes, okay? Why don’t we start by taking roll-call? When I call your name, why don’t you each stand up and tell me a little something about yourselves, okay?’ There was authority in his voice, but his expression remained cheery.

Everyone looked at each other nervously.

Mr. Stone smiled and consulted the roster on his desk.

‘All right ... let’s see who is first. Blacklock, Maria?’

A girl stood up and said in a small voice, ‘Um, hi. My name is Maria and I play the clarinet.’

‘Great, thanks Maria,’ said Mr. Stone, checking off her name. ‘Next is Deveraux, Sadie.’

My friend Sadie stood up and flicked her long, blonde hair over her shoulder. She gave Mr. Stone a dazzling smile as she said. ‘Hello Mr. Stone, my name is Sadie, and I am a Leo, which means I’m a little bit feisty.’

I felt embarrassed for Sadie as she sat back down.

Next was Aaron Ford, then Emily Gaul.

‘Rose Goldman,’ said Mr. Stone, my name rolling off his tongue like velvet.

I stood up. I wanted to say something memorable, but nothing had come to mind.

‘My name is Rose,’ I said, staring at Mr. Stone, who blinked politely back. I found it strange that he made eye contact with me. No one usually did. ‘And I-’

One of the ‘popular’ boys in my class coughed loudly, the words ‘*wet dog*’ clearly audible. It wasn’t the first time I’d been called it.

I had been about to say *I like to read*. Instead I said; ‘And no one likes me.’

Everyone in the classroom laughed, as I sat back down, unabashed.

Mr. Stone stared at me with his eyebrows raised. ‘Well I’m sure I’ll like you just fine, Rose.’

Several people sniggered.

Once the roster had been called, Mr. Stone began to hand out the semester’s literature; a book called *The Colour Purple*.

When he reached me, Mr. Stone placed the book on my desk and lingered for a moment, staring at the novel I’d been reading; *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

‘An interesting choice,’ he said, pointing to my book. ‘Are you enjoying it?’

‘Yes, it’s very sexy,’ I replied, without looking up.

‘You know it was banned in the U.S for a long time?’

‘One-hundred-and-fifty-two years,’ I said. ‘Between eighteen-twenty-one and nineteen-seventy-two.’

‘Right.’ Mr. Stone grinned. ‘You did your research.’

Of course I had. I was obsessed with my books.

I ignored Mr. Stone, and he moved along without another word.

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‘Oh my goodness,’ said Sadie during the lunch break. ‘How good is Mr. Stone?’

Another ‘friend’ Sarah, checked her timetable. ‘Oh, I haven’t got him until *Wednesday*.’

‘*Sarah*,’ said Sadie, through a mouthful of food. ‘He is *gorgeous*.’

‘Ew, Sadie, he’s old,’ said Maria.

Sadie rolled her eyes. ‘He only looks about thirty.’

‘Yeah, that’s fourteen years older than you,’ said Maria.

Sarah raised her eyebrows and looked at me. 'Is he good looking, Rose?'

I shrugged, noncommittally. 'He's okay.' I didn't find anyone attractive, really.

That evening I walked home from school, as usual. The driveway was not empty when I arrived, which was unusual as my parents shouldn't be home from work for another two hours. Two cars were parked in the driveway; my mother's, and a stranger's.

'Hey Mom,' I said, as I entered through the front door. 'You're home early.'

My mother was in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of wine. 'Oh, hey sweetie.'

'Isn't it a little early to start drinking?' I asked.

At that moment I heard the toilet flush down the hall, and a strange man stepped into the kitchen a moment later.

'Oh, Rose. This is Mr. Jenson, from the office. We're going to be doing some work from home this evening.'

Liar, I thought. It would be another hour and a half before my father came home.

'Hello,' I said, my eyes darting between them. I was used to strange men coming into our home.

'Hello, Rose, is it? Your mother has told me so much about you,' said Mr. Jenson. He didn't meet my eyes when he spoke. Like many others, he found it difficult to look at me.

'Has she?' I asked. 'Like what?'

'She's told me what a bright your girl you are.' He looked at my mother as he spoke.

'She lied,' I said, my expression impassive.

'How was school?' asked my mother, clearly trying to diffuse the situation.

'Average,' I replied. 'We have a new English teacher. Sadie thinks he's hot.'

My mother scoffed. 'Perhaps I'll have to go to the student-teacher meetings this year then.'

I shifted uncomfortably, eager to go to my room and leave my mother with her colleague.

'Well, I think I might go to my room and read for a while.'

‘All right, sweetheart,’ she said, glancing at Mr. Jenson.

Once I was locked in my bedroom I flopped onto the bed and pulled a book from under my pillow.

It was my escape. I needed to be somewhere else.

Chapter Two

Wednesday – 20 days to go

‘The Colour Purple is a novel made up of letters, written by the protagonist Celie, to God. Now, in the first letter we learn that Celie was raped by her father, and -’

‘Sick bastard,’ someone muttered. There was a collection of chuckles throughout the class.

Mr. Stone chose to ignore the comment, and continued with his summary. ‘Her father tells Celie that she is forbidden to speak of the encounters, so she writes these letters to God. Can anyone tell me why?’

We’d read the book in class over the last week, and were now diving into analysis of it’s content. Regardless, no one seemed able to answer the question.

‘Anyone?’ Mr. Stone pressed.

Everyone bowed their heads, not wanting to be called upon.

‘Aaron, what do you think?’ said Mr. Stone, perching himself on his desk at the front of the class.

‘Erm,’ Aaron Ford frowned and seemed to be concentrating hard. ‘Well ... if she didn’t write the letters, then there wouldn’t be a book, would there?’

Mr. Stone couldn’t help but smile; a wide, broad, pearly-white smile that reached his eyes.

‘True, I guess,’ he said, ‘but God, in this novel, represents an abstract, authoritative figure for Celie to confess to. We see her idea of God evolve throughout the narrative. Right?’

No one said anything. I shifted uncomfortably, and Mr. Stone’s eyes snapped to me.

‘Rose,’ he said suddenly, making me jolt. ‘How do you think Celie’s perception of God changes?’

‘Um ... For Celie, God moves from being an abstract idea ... to being within herself.’ I said.

‘Right,’ said Mr. Stone, smiling at me.

Thankfully, I was not called upon for the rest of the lesson, but we were given an assignment that day which was to be turned in within a week. The class found this outrageous, but Mr. Stone shouted down their protests.

As I was leaving the classroom, Mr. Stone gave me a tiny wink, which was enough to turn my cheeks a deep shade of red.

Okay, so maybe Mr. Stone *was* good looking. Fair enough. I was able to appreciate male beauty without being attracted to someone. However, it seemed most of the girls at school had a crush on the teacher. They giggled as he walked past, or hassled him while he was on playground duty. Sadie was one of the sad girls who followed him around like a lost puppy dog. It was as though he was a school-celebrity.

I, on the other hand, was highly unpopular. The only people who didn't tease me were the group of girls that allowed me to sit with them at lunch. Everyone else teased me because of my messy hair, and awkward nature. They called me '*wet dog*'. Some people would even bark at me.

I'd leant to ignore it.

I wasn't a particularly gifted student. On a rare occasion I would receive an A, but mostly my grades were average, at best. I was terrible at math, often getting C's and D's.

English was by far my best subject as I devoured books.

I had a part-time job at a local coffee shop as a barista, working two nights a week. It was shit pay, and shit hours, but it was pocket money. With it, I was able to afford the small necessities of life. Not to mention the ten dollars my Mom gave me each week for various chores around the house. Sometimes she'd give me extra money for keeping quiet about her male visitors. All of this money went towards the car I was saving up for. I already had my driver's permit, but no vehicle. With any luck, I'd be able to afford a car by the time I finished high school. My parents would rather jump off a cliff than let me borrow their car.

I had a shift that evening, from four o'clock to eight, so I would walk there straight after school and change once I arrived.

I was an hour into my shift when the bell on the door clanged loudly, signaling the arrival of another customer. It was a quiet evening, and I was working with

my manager, a young woman in her early twenties with bubble-gum pink hair by the name of Estelle.

‘Hello Sir, what can I get you today?’ Estelle asked the customer.

The customer walked towards the counter, and a familiar smell reached my nostrils. Usually, the coffee beans overpowered everything, but this scent was so strong it was almost intoxicating.

‘Can I please have a medium gluten free skim latte to go, please?’

My attention snapped to the customer. It was exactly what I usually ordered. When I saw who it was, I dropped the cloth I was holding.

‘Mr. Stone!’ I gasped, stooping to pick it up. Now I knew why the scent had been familiar. It was Mr. Stone’s unusual cologne.

‘Ah, hello Rose,’ he said as he pulled out his wallet. ‘I didn’t realize you worked here.’

Mr. Stone handed a bill to Estelle, which she took, giving him the exact change a moment later.

‘Uh, yeah,’ I said, my cheeks turning pink. ‘Two nights a week.’

‘That’s great.’

‘Funny ... about your order,’ I said, grabbing a medium cup.

‘Is it?’ he said, thrusting the wallet back into his pocket.

‘Yeah, well ... it’s what I usually have. It’s not a common order.’

Mr. Stone shot me that wide, dazzling smile. ‘Well ... Let’s see how well you can make a coffee, then.’

I’d never taken such care with a coffee before. Once the order was complete I placed it on the counter with a shaking hand. I wasn’t sure why, but I wanted Mr. Stone to like it.

He picked up the cup and brought the coffee to his lips, taking a sip. He smiled, licking the droplet of liquid that lingered on his bottom lip. I couldn’t help but stare.

‘Fantastic,’ he smiled. ‘One of the best I’ve had.’

‘Really?’ I asked, clutching the cloth in my left hand. His approval was strangely gratifying.

Mr. Stone smiled warmly and took another sip. ‘I may be back, Miss Goldman.’

I smiled. ‘I’d like that.’

Mr. Stone swallowed and held the coffee up. 'Thanks, Rose. I'll see you later, okay?' And just like that he left the coffee shop without another word.

Estelle stood by my side, watching Mr. Stone get into his car and drive away.

Estelle was probably one of the few people I tolerated. She taught me that it didn't matter what anyone thought of me, as long as I was true to myself. She'd been terribly bullied in school because of her brightly colored hair and piercings. Her uniqueness was on-purpose though. I, on the other hand, had no choice.

The rest of my shift passed without incident, and I left the café at eight o'clock on the dot, stepping out into the street-lamp lit pathway. I walked everywhere, as my house wasn't far from the school, or the coffee shop. It would only take me ten minutes.

Monday – 15 days to go

The following week I handed in my assignment on *The Colour Purple*, and was eager to find out my results. I'd tried really hard on the essay, only to be disappointed.

When Mr. Stone handed back the assignment a week later, my face fell as I stared at the C+ on the top of the page. I'd been so sure that I'd get a B+ at least. Angry with myself, I stuffed the essay into my bag.

'How'd you do?' hissed Sadie, leaning over to me.

'Okay,' I mumbled.

Sadie waved her essay in front of my face. 'I got a B plus,' she said. 'I guess Mr. Stone is a tough grader.'

'You did better than me,' I said sourly.

I remained in a foul mood for the remainder of the lesson.

My shift that evening was a dull one. We hadn't seen a customer all evening. It was so quiet that my manager Estelle left me the keys and went home early, asking me to lock up. It wasn't the first time this had happened. I'd closed the café many times before now.

I spent the evening cleaning, and daydreaming. That was, until Mr. Stone arrived at the café at a quarter to eight, fifteen minutes before closing time. He wore the same, quirky attire as usual; mismatching shirt and pants that cut off at the ankles, and an old blazer. I could see his navy socks and lace-up boat shoes.

‘I’m not too late, am I?’ he asked, stepping into the shop.

I stood up abruptly, wiping my hands on my apron.

‘Uh, no, of course not,’ I said. ‘Gluten free skim latte?’

‘Yes, please.’

Mr. Stone put his hands into his pockets while I worked on his order, pacing the shop. When it was done, I slid it across the counter towards him. He pulled out his wallet, but I shook my head.

‘On the house,’ I said.

Mr. Stone stopped rifling through his wallet and glanced up at me. ‘What?’

‘No charge,’ I said.

He stared at the coffee. ‘I have to pay,’ he said.

I shook my head. ‘It’s fine.’

‘No,’ he smiled politely and handed me a twenty-dollar bill. ‘I *have* to pay.’

I frowned and snatched the twenty-dollars from his hand, before thrusting the change back at him. ‘There,’ I said.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, staring.

I chewed on the inside of my lip, biting back the question I wanted to ask, but it spilled from me like molten lava.

‘Why did you give me such a shit grade?’ I asked.

Mr. Stone blinked as though he didn’t understand the question. ‘I gave you the grade you deserved for the paper,’ he replied.

‘I think I deserved better,’ I said. I wasn’t sure why I’d taken it to heart.

‘I think you could *do* better,’ he replied, picking up the coffee. ‘Your information was correct, but your writing was disconnected to the feelings and thoughts of the characters in the novel. You lacked empathy.’

‘Empathy?’ I repeated. ‘Is that it?’

I was not good at understand people and their emotions. Sometimes I felt like an entirely different species.

‘Goodnight, Rose.’

He turned on his heel and walked from the café, glancing back at me as he stepped onto the pavement.

Tuesday – 14 days to go

‘I’d like a thousand word report on why the rebellion was futile,’ Mr. Stone told our class the next day.

The class erupted into protest.

‘But *Sir!*’

‘We just finished the *last* essay!’

Mr. Stone held up a hand to silence the class, which surprisingly, worked.

‘I know, I know,’ he said with a smile. ‘I’m horrible. I understand, but you’ll thank me for it later, I promise. Now, I’d like you to devise a modern-day equivalent of the situation depicted in the prose and work it into the essay.’

I was still unexplainably annoyed about my last English grade. Until now, it had always been my best subject.

‘Why are you in such a foul mood?’ asked Sadie that afternoon. ‘I mean ... fouler than usual.’

We were walking home together, but would go our different ways towards the end of the journey.

I shrugged, not wanting to talk about it. I just wanted to get home.

‘I can’t wait to get home and start that essay,’ said Sadie. I’d always been better at English than her, but suddenly she had over taken me.

‘Why?’ I asked. Apparently people liked it when you asked about things.

‘I *love* Mr. Stone’s class,’ she said with a sigh. ‘He’s so great.’

I clenched my jaw. ‘I don’t see it,’ I muttered.

‘Are you joking? Everyone loves him.’

‘He’s over rated,’ I decided, quickening my pace.

Sadie dropped the topic after that.

I wasn't sure why I was so bitter about Mr. Stone's class. He was polite, and charming, but so damn harsh when it came to teaching. I couldn't help but want him to like me, though.

After my usual afternoon routine I decided to make a start on the homework that had built up over the past week. I'd start with Mr. Stone's essay. I was determined to get a B, at least. I wouldn't settle for anything less.

I spent hours on the work, starting, and restarting the essay. Soon, my bin was filled with scrunched up bits of paper. I couldn't get it right. But then, suddenly, miraculously ... an idea formed in my head. It was crazy ... but I was going to do it. And Mr. Stone wouldn't like it.

Chapter Three

Tuesday – 7 days to go

‘When I call your name, please bring your paper to the front of the class,’ said Mr. Stone, pulling out the roster. ‘Maria.’

Maria jumped up from her seat and handed her homework to Mr. Stone, who checked her name off the list.

‘Sadie. Aaron. Emily.’

They each took their assignment to the front of the class and placed it on top of the pile.

‘Rose.’

I didn’t move. Instead, I crossed my arms and legs and stared at Mr. Stone. It took him a few moments to notice that I hadn’t done as instructed.

‘Rose,’ he repeated, looking up at me.

All eyes turned in my direction.

‘Rose,’ Sadie hissed. ‘Take your essay to him.’

I smiled and stared at Mr. Stone. ‘I didn’t do the assignment,’ I said.

Everyone was silent.

‘You didn’t do it?’ he asked.

I shook my head. ‘I chose not to.’

Mr. Stone raised his eyebrows and interlocked his fingers. ‘You *chose* not to do it?’

‘That’s right.’

Mr. Stone pursed his lips, seemingly unimpressed. ‘Suit yourself. You’ll see me after class.’

Pleased with myself, I leaned back in my chair, a smug expression on my face.

‘What’s gotten into you?’ Sadie whispered to me as Mr. Stone continued collecting the other essays. ‘You’ll get detention.’

I smiled at her. ‘I don’t think I will.’

At the end of the lesson, the bell rang and the students filed out. I remained sitting in my seat until the last of them had left. Mr. Stone did not look up from his desk. Instead, he ignored me for a full minute.

‘Come here,’ he said, stacking the papers on his desk, still avoiding eye contact.

I stood up and picked up my bag, walking to his desk and sitting in the chair opposite.

‘Rose, you realize I’m going to have to give you a zero for this assignment?’ he asked, glancing up at me. He seemed surprised to see that I was grinning. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘I chose not to do the assignment, Mr. Stone,’ I said, slowly and clearly.

‘Yes, you told me that,’ he said, disapprovingly. I couldn’t stand the way his emerald eyes bore into mine. He needed to understand why I’d done it.

‘In the text, they rebel against the government, but their attempts are futile.’

‘Yes, I know the text well,’ said Mr. Stone, crossing his arms.

‘For our assignment you wanted us to show you a modern day example of why rebellion doesn’t work. So-’

‘You *chose* not to do the assignment,’ he finished my sentence, understanding in his tone.

I nodded and prepared for the explosion that would follow.

To my surprise, Mr. Stone’s face broke into a wide grin, his eyes sparkling.

‘So, you see-’ I began to explain, but he held up a hand to silence me.

‘Oh, I understand,’ he said. ‘You’re very clever.’

I raised my eyebrows, shocked by his praise.

‘If I give you a zero-’ he began slowly.

‘-You’ll prove my point,’ I finished. ‘My rebellion will have been in vain, just like in the prose you assigned.’

Mr. Stone sat back in his chair and observed me, lacing his fingers behind his head. He watched me, a slight smile on his face.

‘Clever girl,’ he smirked. ‘Very brave.’

My chest felt tight at his approval.

‘So,’ I said slowly. ‘What are you going to do?’

Mr. Stone leaned forwards and scrutinized me. ‘I’ll forgive you just this one time,’ he said. ‘But don’t tell anyone, okay?’

‘Because you know I’m right,’ I said.
He laughed, his eyes creasing at the sides. ‘You’ve outwitted me,’ he admitted.
‘I’ll tell everyone you gave me detention.’
Mr. Stone laughed, and waved a hand at me. ‘Get out of here.’
I grabbed my bag and scampered from the room, my spirits high.
Sadie was waiting for me in the corridor.
‘Did you get a zero?’ she asked at once.
I shook my head. ‘Nope.’
‘Detention?’
‘Something like that,’ I said happily.
I left it at that, pulling out my lunch and sitting amongst the other females within my group of ‘friends’.

Wednesday – 6 days to go

I slept badly the night before, and was sad that I didn’t have English class today. I did, however, have my shift at the café to focus on the next day. Though the ominous clouds overhead indicated that I was going to have a wet walk home.

I wasn’t sure why, but I had a sense of heightened anticipation throughout the entire shift, as though I was waiting for Mr. Stone to walk through the doors. Every time the bell clanged, my head snapped up. But I was disappointed each time.

Soon, the storm that had been brewing overhead broke open, and it began to rain heavily. The rain pounded the shop-front, scaring away any potential customers that walked by.

Estelle sighed and tucked a tendril of her pink hair behind her ear. ‘Well, there goes our business,’ she said.

I mumbled in agreement, adjusting the headband that kept my bangs out of my eyes.

‘Maybe we should call it a day,’ she said, straightening up.

‘Oh no,’ I said pleadingly. ‘Don’t cut my shift short, Estelle. I really need the money.’

Estelle sighed and put her hands on her hips. ‘You’re going to be bored out of your mind, kiddo.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. ‘You never know, we might get a few people that are caught in the rain.’

‘Fine, but I’m out of here. Don’t tell the boss, okay?’

I grinned. ‘Sure.’

Estelle threw me the keys and left me in the café, alone. I loved the café at night, especially in a storm. I was transfixed by the rain as it hit the pavement.

An hour passed, and I watched as people ran past the shop, ducking to get out of the rain. Many ran to their cars and hopped inside, driving away.

Clang.

The door opened just as I began to shut up shop. I’d already counted the till and placed the money in the safe. Not to mention the coffee machine was in pieces, being cleaned.

A sopping wet man entered the café, shaking his umbrella in the door. Who else would it be, but Mr. Stone? I think I knew that he would arrive sooner or later. I could smell his cologne on the wind.

‘Hello, Sir,’ I said, watching him shake the water out of his hair.

‘Hello Rose,’ he said, putting his umbrella in the corner.

‘I was just about to close,’ I said, shutting the till and walking around the counter.

‘Damn.’ Mr. Stone placed his hands on his hips. ‘But you make the best coffee around here.’

I smiled a little bit. ‘Sorry.’

‘Oh well,’ he sighed, picking up the umbrella again. ‘Next time, I guess.’

‘Right,’ I agreed, sorry that the meeting was being cut so short.

Mr. Stone rolled back onto the balls of his feet, his lips pursed. ‘All right ... well ... I’ll see you later, I guess.’

‘Yeah. See you later,’ I said with a tiny wave.

I watched as Mr. Stone opened his umbrella and stepped out into the pouring rain.

Ten minutes later and I was closing the shop. Placing the keys in my pocket, I pulled the hood of my jacket over my head, shielding myself against the rain, but I was soaked within minutes.

I'd barely gotten halfway down the street, when a pair of blaring headlights illuminated the pathway ahead of me. I ignored the car as it pulled up beside me, but jumped violently when a horn sounded. I stared at the driver, slightly offended, but was relieved to see that it was Mr. Stone.

'Hey!' he called through the open passenger window.

I leaned towards the door. 'Hey, Mr. Stone.'

He drove an old, beat up Ford Escort. Its red paint was peeling and the seams were rusted. It looked as though it was ready for the junkyard. Everything about Mr. Stone was second-hand.

'Get in!' he called over the thundering rain.

I shook my head. 'No, I'll get the inside of your car all wet!'

'Just do it,' he ordered, reaching across and unlatching the door, letting it swing open.

I obliged, jumping into the passenger seat and closing the door quickly so no more water would get into the car.

'You're drenched,' Mr. Stone commented as I began to wind up the window.

'Sorry,' I mumbled, removing the sopping jacket and stuffing it into my bag.

'Don't be sorry,' he laughed. 'You're going to catch a cold. Don't you have anyone to pick you up after work?'

I shrugged. 'My parents are busy,' I said as I pulled my brown hair from my face and tied it into a messy bun at the back of my head. Mr. Stone watched me as I did this, his hands on the wheel. We hadn't moved from the curb since I'd gotten into the car which vibrated rather violently as we idled. I wasn't sure the car would make it to my house.

'Where do you live?' he asked. 'I'll take you home.'

'It's only a few blocks from here,' I said. 'On Maple Street.'

'That's near me,' he replied, putting the car into first gear with a loud crunch and pulling away from the curb.

We sat in silence as he drove. I watched the windscreen wipers go back and forth, as though they were playing an absurd game of tag. They screeched loudly with each swipe as the perished rubber scraped against the windscreen.

I wanted to say something intelligent, but I knew nothing I said would be good enough.

‘It’s interesting what you told me,’ Mr. Stone said suddenly, ‘That first day in class.’

I tried to recall what he was talking about. ‘What?’

He frowned drove, glancing sideways at me. ‘You said that no one likes you.’

‘So?’

‘Well that doesn’t seem true.’

‘It is. Everyone thinks I’m a freak.’

‘I’ve seen you sitting with that group of girls at lunch time.’

‘They tolerate me,’ I said. ‘But they don’t actually like me.’

‘Why not?’

‘Maybe I smell bad.’ I’d been accused of smelling like wet dog before, but I was extremely hygienic.

Mr. Stone sniffed the air mockingly. ‘You don’t smell bad,’ he reassured me. I wanted to tell him that he smelled amazing, but thought it would be inappropriate. ‘You seem to have quite a sense of humor. After that, and the essay-’

‘I wasn’t trying to be funny,’ I replied, shifting uncomfortably. My work shirt was soaked through, and clinging to my body like plastic-wrap.

Mr. Stone glanced at me, but quickly focused on the road ahead. It was a wonder he could see at all; the rain was so heavy, it was as though a grey veil had been placed over the windshield.

‘I think you’re an intelligent girl,’ he said after a minute. ‘You just seem distracted most of the time.’

I didn’t respond. I just sat there, with my hands curled in my lap.

‘Is this your road?’ he asked, turning onto Maple Street.

‘Yes, number eleven.’

Mr. Stone pulled up in front of my house and peered through the window. The lights were off, and the house was dark.

'Is anyone home?' he asked, checking the time on his dashboard, which read eight-fifteen.

'Probably not,' I said. 'But I have keys.'

It seemed he wanted to say something else, but he kept his mouth shut. I sat there for a few seconds as the awkward silence stretched onwards.

'Well, thanks for the lift Mr. Stone.'

'See you at school, Rose.'

I got out of the car and slammed it behind myself, running up the driveway without glancing back at Mr. Stone's car. Once inside, I hurried to the window and peered through the curtains, watching him drive away, until his headlights vanished down the street.

I had been correct in my assumption; no one was home.

Just the way I liked it. Just the way I was used to it.

Chapter Four

Sunday – 2 days to go

After the attack, I never cried. Nor did I play with the other children. I was absorbed in my own world, contained entirely within my head. I didn't need to interact with others to have fun.

Apparently I was unnerving; I'd sit perfectly still, my eyes glazed over. My parents had even taken me to a psychologist to find out if there was something wrong with me mentally. The shrink decided that I was perfectly fine; to an extent.

Of course, my parents knew that I was not normal.

So I often hid my daydreaming, and only did it when I was alone. However, I slipped up quite often, especially during class.

I wasn't sure if I was imagining things, but I always felt as though Mr. Stone's eyes were upon me whenever my attention was focused elsewhere during class. I'd look up in the hopes of catching him, but was always disappointed.

Soon, I was looking forward to his classes; looking forward to seeing him. Mr. Stone was delightful, and was the first person I'd ever actually liked.

Monday – 1 day to go

I was sick again. It had been twenty-eight days since my last 'episode'.

'That time of the month' my mother referred to it, but the sickness had nothing to do with my period.

I broke into cold sweats, and shook violently. I'd vomit until my stomach was empty, and I wouldn't be able to eat at all. This was the only time my parents were around to take care of me.

It got worse at night.

I'd scream and thrash, completely delusional with fever. The first time this happened I was nine, and my parents took me to the hospital. It hadn't been long since I'd left after my attack.

The doctors said my temperature was a record high; I should have been dead, or at least brain-dead.

I had no diagnosis and they expected me to die within the hour. They advised my parents to take me home and make sure I was comfortable, which they did.

What a load of shit.

I experience this living hell every single month, and it doesn't get any easier. Luckily for me the worst of it only lasts between fourteen to eighteen hours, though I can feel the effects beginning a day before, and it usually takes another full day for me to recover.

I would be forced to miss three days of school, and two shifts at the café. My teachers were used to my absence. At first they'd assumed I was bunking-off, but a letter from my parents quickly set things straight.

Tuesday – 0 days to go

'Mom, it's starting,' I croaked.

'It's all right sweetheart. 'It'll be over before you know it.'

She held my hair back while I vomited into a bucket, splashing chunks everywhere.

'Make it stop,' I begged in between heaves.

'I wish I could sweetie.'

Sweat drenched my brow, and my clothes clung to my body. I felt cold, but my temperature was well over one-hundred-and-six degrees. I shook violently as my mother stroked my hair.

'Stop fucking touching me,' I snapped at her. She was used to my foul mouth when it came to 'my time of the month'.

'Come on sweetie, it's time to take you downstairs.'

She was right. I couldn't hold on much longer.

My father carried me into the basement where we had a make-shift room for this specific occasion. The room had been made soundproof, reinforced with steel and a heavy door when I was a child and the sickness began.

‘Mom, I’m cold.’ My teeth chattered as my Dad placed me on the steel-framed bed.

The time was getting closer. I could feel my skin prickling and I knew the worst was about to come.

‘You have to do it now, Mom,’ I wheezed.

‘Let’s get these on you then,’ said my mother, taking my hand. She secured the restraints around my wrists and tightened them so I could not get free. My father secured my ankles.

Soon, I was strapped down to the bed, unable to move in any direction.

‘Wh-what’s the time?’ I asked.

My mother checked her watch. ‘A few minutes before sundown.’

‘It’s starting,’ I said through gritted teeth.

My parents didn’t need telling twice. They left the basement so they didn’t have to witness the worst of my affliction.

Monday – 23 days to go

The following week I eagerly awaited my shift at the café, in the hopes that Mr. Stone would turn up. When it came close to closing time, I always offered to stay back and clean up to Estelle’s delight.

Mr. Stone arrived late, as usual.

‘Am I too late again?’ he asked, stepping through the door.

‘No,’ I shook my head and walked around the counter with a coffee in my hand. ‘I already made you one.’

Mr. Stone raised his eyebrows as he took the cup. ‘You made this for me?’

I shrugged.

‘How’d you know I was coming?’ he asked.

‘I was hoping.’

He scrutinized me for a moment, before smirking. 'Ah. You made it for yourself, didn't you? We have the same coffee.'

'Nope.' I held up a second cup. 'This is mine.'

'Oh.' Mr. Stone glanced at his cup before looking around. 'So, are you finished for the night?'

I walked past Mr. Stone and flipped the sign on the door so it read 'closed' from the outside. 'Now I am,' I said with a smile.

He smiled and shifted a little awkwardly, the cup of coffee held loosely in his hand.

I moved across the café and sat in one of the booths, sipping my drink.

'Aren't you going to join me?' I asked.

Mr. Stone looked out of the café window at the dark street outside. 'Uh ... I thought your shift was over. Aren't you going to close up?'

'I can have a coffee if I like,' I said. 'Why don't you join me?'

He stood in the middle of the café for several seconds deciding what to do. He must have decided that coffee with his student wasn't so bad, because he sat opposite me a moment later.

I held my coffee tightly in my hands and stared at Mr. Stone as he sipped his rather nervously. He sat hunched over with his elbows on the table, his eyes darting outside as though he feared we were being watched.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'Nothing,' he said a little too quickly. 'I just ... it's strange sitting in here alone.'

'With me?' I asked.

He threw me a glance. 'Well, some people might get the wrong idea.'

'It's only coffee,' I said.

He exhaled loudly, his shoulders loosening up. 'You're right.'

As he drank his coffee I observed what he was wearing today. It was no different to the usual. He wore a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. It was a little too big for him. The shirt underneath had an ugly paisley pattern on it.

I did not hide my gaze as I looked around the table to see his pants, which were a type of brown velvet. He wore the same lace-up boat shoes as usual, this time with no socks.

'What?' he said a little embarrassed as I scrutinized his attire.

'You dress so strange,' I said, leaning back against the booth and observing him.

He smiled and sipped his coffee. 'Do I?'

'Yeah ... it's eccentric. Like a mad professor.'

Mr. Stone chuckled, his emerald eyes twinkling, reflecting the streetlights outside. 'Don't you like the way I dress?'

I frowned, considering it for a moment. I liked it very much, indeed. 'I think it suits you,' I said.

'Would you like to know a secret?' he asked, leaning forwards.

'I'm not good at keeping secrets,' I replied.

Mr. Stone raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. 'I do all my shopping at the thrift-store.'

I feigned a look of shock. 'Really? I would never have guessed.'

He laughed. 'All right, no need to get smart.'

Perhaps Mr. Stone is poor, I thought. After all, he was a little rough around the edges, not to mention his car was about to fall apart. It would be rude to ask though.

'I promise not to tell a soul,' I said, tracing an 'X' over my heart.

Mr. Stone rolled his eyes and drained the rest of his cup.

'So, um ... sorry that I missed two of your classes last week.'

Mr. Stone placed his empty cup on the table. 'Did you?' he asked.

That hurt. 'You didn't notice?'

'I had a couple of days off last week,' he admitted.

'Is everything okay?' I asked.

He waved a hand. 'Just the common cold,' he said. 'I'm afraid it defeated me.'

'Yeah, me too,' I lied. 'Must be going around.'

Mr. Stone gave me a strained smile. 'So have you always lived in Halfway?'

I nodded. 'Born and raised. What about you?'

'I was born here, but moved away when I was eighteen to go to college,' he said, leaning on the table and looking out of the window.

'Why'd you come back?' I asked.

'Do you wish I hadn't?' He smirked.

The corner of my mouth twitched as I tried to hide my smile.

'After I graduated from college I got a job at a high school in the city, where I taught for six years,' he said. 'I liked it there.'

'So why'd you leave?'

'I got sick,' he said simply, 'during a visit with my parents here in Halfway. They thought I was going to die.'

This story sounded all too familiar to me.

'After I got better they asked me to stay in Halfway. I guess they were scared of losing me.'

'Understandable,' I said.

'But I ended up losing them,' he said stiffly. 'They both died a month after I returned.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine. They were getting on in age, I suppose.'

Something told me that Mr. Stone did not want to talk about this.

'But that was five years ago,' he said.

'Five years ago?' I repeated. 'Did you teach at all during that time?'

Mr. Stone shook his head.

'Why not?' I asked. 'What did you do for five years?'

Mr. Stone shifted uncomfortably. 'It's ... late.'

'What? It's only eight-thirty.'

'I've got a lot of homework to grade,' he said. 'What do I owe you for the coffee?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I've already emptied the till.'

He sighed and slid out of the booth. 'Next time, then.'

I wasn't sure why I was so crestfallen at the prospect of him leaving.

Mr. Stone fastened a button on his jacket, seemingly stalling for time. 'Would you like a ride home?' he asked.

My heart shot into my throat. 'But ... it's not raining.'

Mr. Stone buried his hands in his pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet.

'It's dangerous at night. You can never be too careful.'

I stood up too and slung my bag over my shoulder. 'All right, then.'

We exited the shop together, and he watched as I turned out the lights and locked the door. We walked to his car, and to my surprise he opened the passenger door for me.

It took several goes for the car to start, with Mr. Stone muttering apologies under his breath as he turned the key in the ignition.

‘Did you get this at the thrift-store, too?’ I asked, trying not to smile.

He ignored my jibe, and exhaled with relief as the car roared to life.

‘Yes, good girl,’ he said, patting the dashboard.

We pulled away from the coffee shop and drove along the darkened streets. I didn’t say anything for most of the way. Mr. Stone had the radio turned right down so the classical music was almost indistinguishable, but still he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and hummed to himself. It was as though he was from another time. I’d never met anyone like him. Classical music, old clothing, and a beat-up car; something told me that Mr. Stone was not like other men.

Being so close to him, I could smell his cologne. I inhaled deeply, the scent calming me.

‘What is that cologne you’re wearing?’ I asked, suddenly.

Mr. Stone’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. ‘I’m not wearing any cologne,’ he said. ‘Why? Do I smell bad?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘You smell good.’

‘Really?’

I nodded.

I watched as he drove past my turn-off, and didn’t say anything. He took the long route to my house, through the backstreets. I didn’t mind; I felt safe. Maybe he was lonely, or perhaps he’d just forgotten the way. Regardless, I didn’t direct him.

‘Are you married?’ I asked after a long silence.

‘No,’ he replied stiffly.

‘Have you ever been?’

He took longer to answer this time. ‘I was engaged once.’

‘What happened?’

His jaw tensed. ‘It’s not important.’

‘Did it end after you got sick?’ I asked.

He ignored me and I dropped the subject after that.

When we finally pulled up in front of my home, the house was dark once more. He didn’t ask about it this time. Instead, he looked straight ahead, unblinking. We hadn’t spoken for the last ten minutes.

‘Thanks for the lift,’ I said, clutching my bag in my lap. I reached for the door handle and let myself out of the car.

‘Goodnight,’ he said.

Once I’d closed the door behind myself I leaned into the window. ‘I work Monday and Wednesday nights,’ I said quickly. ‘If you ever want to talk.’

Mr. Stone stared at me, his eyes darting across my face.

I wasn’t sure why I had said that so I turned on my heel and quickly marched away from his car, towards my front door. Mr. Stone had already driven away by the time I’d reached for my keys.

Chapter Five

Tuesday – 22 days to go

I had to attend mandatory counseling at school once a month. My teachers seemed to think I was depressed and would do myself harm. I wasn't sad; I was empty.

I barely spoke during the sessions with the councilor, Mrs. Harvey. She was a hundred-and-eight year old moth, with enormous spectacles, who smelled of cabbage and cats. However, if I didn't go then a note was sent home to my parents.

I didn't see why they forced me; I wasn't a threat to the other students. Not while I was healthy, anyway. I took days off school when I was ... sick.

I knocked on the councilor's door on Tuesday evening, hearing shuffling on the other side. A moment later Mrs. Harvey answered the door, squinting at me through her bottle-glass spectacles.

'Ah, Miss Roland, welcome.'

'It's Goldman,' I corrected her, stepping inside the office.

'Yes, that's what I said.'

I sat down in my usual chair and waited for Mrs. Harvey to take her seat, which took a while as she didn't walk very fast.

'So how are you then, Miss Goldman?' Mrs. Harvey asked, lowering herself slowly into her chair.

'Fine,' I said.

'How is your school work going?'

'Fine.'

'Excellent. I noticed you had a few days off school the other week. Are you feeling better now?'

'Yes.'

Mrs. Harvey chewed on the inside of her cheek. 'Mmmn ... I see. How are your parents?'

I shifted uncomfortably. 'Fine, I guess.'

'You guess?'

'I don't know.'

'Why not?'

I shrugged. 'They work.'

'You don't talk to them after work?' she asked.

'Sometimes,' I said.

'All right. What about your friends? Boyfriends?'

I folded my arms across my chest. 'I don't have a boyfriend.'

'No one takes your fancy?' she asked.

I thought about Mr. Stone and electricity shot through my body, making me jerk. This did not go unnoticed by Mrs. Harvey.

She smiled, showing her pearly-white dentures. 'I'll take that as a yes.'

'You can take it any way you like, Mrs. Harvey.'

'Rose, I know you try to make yourself emotionally unavailable because you are afraid of getting hurt-'

'That's not right at all,' I interrupted.

'Isn't it?' Mrs. Harvey asked. 'Then why do you refuse to open yourself up to friendships and relationships?'

'I'm not worried about getting hurt,' I said. 'I'm worried about hurting others.'

Mrs. Harvey peered at me over her spectacles. 'Do you sometimes imagine yourself hurting others?'

I sighed exasperatedly. 'No, nothing like that.'

'Then what?'

'I'm tired of this conversation,' I said. 'I think I'll go.'

~

One thing I noticed about Mr. Stone was that he always wore the same lace-up boat shoes. They were worn, and the canvas was frayed so I decided to buy him a new pair. I wandered through many shops along the main street of town, but nothing seemed very 'him'. Finally, I came across a thrift-store I'd never entered before. My mother and father did not like to shop in places like these because they considered themselves above it.

I loved it. I walked straight to the shoe-section and looked for something that screamed Mr. Stone. There wasn't a lot of variety. Most of the shoes were of the cowboy variety. If not that, then worn joggers that smelled funny.

Then I saw them, a pair of classic English shoes made of brown leather. They looked like something an old professor might wear, and they looked almost brand new. A bit of a polish and they'd shine up nicely. They looked to be the right size too. I grabbed them and checked the sole for a price-tag.

Five dollars. I quickly purchased the shoes.

Thursday – 20 days to go

I decided to hang back after English class to give Mr. Stone the shoes that had been stuffed inside my backpack. I packed my things more slowly than the rest of the class, until it was only Mr. Stone and I in the classroom. He was dusting off the lesson's work from the blackboard, so he had his back to me.

'Hey,' I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder and weaving through the desks until I reached him.

Mr. Stone looked over his shoulder as he put the duster down, his mouth curling into a smile as he realized whom had spoken.

'Hello, Rose,' he said, wiping his hands on his worn-out jeans, leaving dusty handprints on the thighs. 'What can I do for you?'

'I wanted to talk to you,' I said, perching myself on the edge of his desk and crossing my legs. Mr. Stone's eyes traveled along my calves before snapping to my face, his expression guilty.

'About the lesson?' he asked, a little too quickly.

'No,' I smiled, opening my backpack and digging around. I pulled out the thrift-store plastic bag containing the shoes and handed it to Mr. Stone.

'What's this?' he asked, holding the bag.

'Open it,' I prompted.

Mr. Stone untied the handles of the bag and peered inside.

'Shoes?' he asked, looking up at me.

'For you,' I nodded.

He pulled them out of the bag and inspected them. 'You got these for me?'

I smiled. 'You always wear the same shoes, and I saw these and thought they would suit you.'

'They're really nice,' he said, touching the leather. 'Probably a bad thing.'

'Why?' I asked.

'I can't have nice things,' he smirked. 'They don't last long.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Just try them on, will you?'

Mr. Stone looked troubled. 'Rose ... I can't accept gifts from students.'

'But I'm not just any student, right?' I gave him a smile, which Mr. Stone returned.

'No,' he said slowly.

'It can be our little secret,' I said. 'I promise I won't tell anyone.'

Mr. Stone grinned and sat down in his chair, before pulling off his shoes and slipping on the brown leather loafers.

'Do they fit?' I asked at once.

'Yes, they do,' he said, standing up and taking a few steps in them.

'Do you like them?' I pressed.

He looked down at his feet. 'I do.'

My chest swelled with pride. 'I thought they were very you.'

'Do I look like a mad professor now?' he asked, smirking.

'You did, anyway,' I laughed.

'I hope you didn't spend much on them, Rose. They look a little expensive.'

'I spent a fortune,' I lied. 'A whole five dollars at the thrift-store.'

Mr. Stone threw his head back and laughed. 'You can find some amazing things at the thrift shop.'

'You're telling me. I bought an entire wardrobe for twenty dollars.'

He smiled warmly. 'Thank you very much, Rose.'

'You're welcome.'

'Now, get out of here and go to lunch.'

I grinned. 'See you at the café on Monday?' I asked.

I smiled guiltily. 'It's a date.'

Monday – 16 days to go

The shop was busy and we had extra staff working that evening. Estelle said something about an event in town, so it seemed we were getting a little extra business. I was happy when the café was filled with customers; it meant the shift passed quickly.

At six o'clock Sadie Deveraux entered the café, grinning widely at me.

'Hey Rose,' she said, bouncing towards the counter.

'Hey,' I replied. I didn't have much time to chat as I was currently working on several coffees at once.

'It's busy in here for a change,' she noted, looking around.

'Yeah.' I wiped my brow with the back of my hand. 'Did you want a coffee?'

'A hot chocolate, please. I don't drink coffee.'

I added Sadie's order to the list and gave it to her on the house. Estelle wouldn't mind; it was only a few cents worth of ingredients.

'What brings you here anyway?' I asked her.

'There was a show on in town,' said Sadie. 'Aaron Ford asked me to go with him.'

'Aaron asked you?' I raised an eyebrow. 'I didn't know you two were so close.'

Sadie rolled her eyes. 'We're not, but I took pity on him.'

Sadie was an average looking blonde girl who was quite popular with the boys at school. However, I believed this was only because she'd developed rather large breasts at an early age. At only seventeen years old, she already wore a D cup bra. She didn't tried to hide it either, often wearing low cut tops.

I, on the other hand, was average. Not big, not small. I didn't mind.

Clang. Another customer entered the shop. I looked up, hoping to see Mr. Stone, but of course it wasn't him. I'd been getting my hopes up all evening. My disappointment must have shown.

'Are you waiting for someone?' Sadie asked, looking over her shoulder at the door.

'No.' I shook my head quickly.

'Well, I'd better get going,' she said, checking her phone.

Clang. I looked up and my heart jumped into my throat. *Mr. Stone.*

I was about to say 'hello' to him, but Sadie beat me to it.

'Mr. Stone!' she waved frantically. 'Hey!'

Mr. Stone's eyes fell on me first, but then slid to Sadie. 'Ah, hello Sadie. How are you?'

'Great!' she beamed, clutching her hot chocolate with both hands.

Sadie watched as Mr. Stone ordered his coffee with Estelle. 'Can I please have a medium gluten free skim latte please?'

'Hey, that's really weird,' she said, standing next to him. 'That's the exact same thing that Rose gets.'

'Is it?' Mr. Stone pulled a crisp bill out of his wallet and passed it to Estelle. He knew perfectly well that it was.

Sadie nodded. 'Yeah. How weird. I don't drink coffee though.'

'I thought you were leaving?' I asked Sadie as I began to make Mr. Stone's coffee. I hoped she would leave.

She shot me a furious look. 'No, I was just about to have a seat,' she said. 'Would you like to join me, Mr. Stone?'

He glanced at me before looking at Sadie. 'Um ... I was just about to be on my way, actually.'

'Oh, don't be silly!' Sadie rested her hand on Mr. Stone's arm. 'Sit with me!'

I slid Mr. Stone's coffee along the counter to him, my jaw set tight. My eyes darted between the two of them, waiting for his response. He gave me one last glance before nodding at Sadie.

'Sure.'

My skin prickled with jealousy as I watched Sadie and Mr. Stone share a booth, sipping their drinks. Sadie laughed and toyed with her hair as she chatted away happily. He listened, smiling politely, but I caught him glancing towards me a couple of times.

They talked for over half an hour, long after their beverages had been consumed. I was too busy to eavesdrop on what they talked about.

Eventually, the shop became quiet, until it was only Estelle, Sadie, Mr. Stone and a few other lingering people in the café.

'Well, I'd better get going,' I overheard him say to Sadie. 'Lots of essays to grade, after all.'

She looked visibly crestfallen. 'Oh, all right. Um. Can I get a lift home, Mr. Stone?'

He paused, halfway through buttoning up his blazer. 'What?'

'It's getting dark,' said Sadie, pointing outside. 'And I'd have to walk home.'

'I'm not sure that-' he began, but Sadie interrupted.

'Please? It's dangerous at night.' Sadie used the same excuse that Mr. Stone had to take me home.

His jaw tensed, and I saw a vein throb in his temple. 'All right, sure.'

I watched as they left together, and Mr. Stone glanced back at me before leading Sadie to his car which was parked on the street. He didn't open the passenger door for her like he had for me. At least that was something.

I burned with jealousy as I watched him drive her away. It made me dizzy to see it.

'Rose?' Estelle waved a hand in front of me. 'Rose, I need a caramel latte.'

'Oh, right. Yeah, sorry.' I shook my head and focussed on work once more.

I couldn't help but feel that Sadie had stolen my time with Mr. Stone. *My time*. The thought rang in my head like bells. Had I really become so possessive over a man I barely knew? And a teacher at that. What had gotten into me?

Friday – 12 days to go

My homework had built up over the last few days, and I was very behind in *everything*. I knew Maria, a 'friend' in many of my classes stayed in the library after school hours to study, so she asked if I wanted to join her. I agreed, as I didn't have work that afternoon.

It was terribly boring. We sat in silence, scribbling away. She helped me with a few of the questions. Maria was a straight 'A' student.

'What a way to spend a Friday afternoon,' I grumbled.

'Have you spoken to Sadie recently?' Maria asked, flipping through her math book.

'No.' Honestly, I'd been avoiding her for the last few days. I was mad at her, but she wasn't to know that.

'She's been telling everyone that Mr. Stone gave her a ride home on Monday.'

My grip tightened around my pen. 'Oh.'

'She said he couldn't stop staring at her tits.'

'She's lying,' I said at once.

'How do you know?' asked Maria.

'C'mon,' I rolled my eyes. 'You know Sadie. She's always flaunting them. It's hard to *not* look at them.'

Maria smiled sheepishly. 'You're right, I guess. I hope she doesn't do anything stupid.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, putting my pen down.

Maria shrugged. 'You know what she's like. If she wants something, she gets it.'

This annoyed me greatly. 'Well Mr. Stone isn't an idiot. I bet he can see right through her.'

Maria shrugged. Clearly she wasn't as interested in the topic of Mr. Stone as I was.

'I have to go,' said Maria, stacking her books. 'I have clarinet practice in half an hour.'

'Oh, all right. Thanks for your help,' I said, remaining in my seat.

I watched as Maria stuffed her textbooks into her bag before slinging it over her shoulder. 'See you later Rose. Bye Mrs. Finnicks,' she added to the librarian, a sweet old lady in her sixties.

So I was left in the library. Slowly, the other students began to pack up and leave until there was only a few stragglers left.

'The library will be closing in ten minutes, dear,' said Mrs. Finnicks, bustling past with an arm full of books.

'Okay,' I said. There was no more I could do. I began to pack up my things, stuffing my pen and whiteout into my pencil case.

'See you, Rose,' Aaron Ford waved at me and left the library. Now it was only myself and the librarian left, but she was currently out of sight, stacking books upon shelves. I could hear her feet shuffling along the carpet somewhere at the back of the library.

The doors opened, and Mr. Stone entered with a book in his hands. I watched him as he placed it into the 'returns' chute at the front desk. I wanted to call out to him, but I was still embarrassed about our last encounter. He must have felt my eyes upon him because his gaze suddenly slid towards me.

The grin that broke across his face was heart melting. He was usually smiling but *this* was different; he looked genuinely pleased to see me.

He crossed the library, walking towards the desk I was sitting at.

'Catching up on homework?' he asked.

I nodded, swallowing hard. It felt as though something was stuck in my throat, preventing me from talking.

'What are you working on?' he asked.

I looked down at the textbook that was sprawled in front of me. 'Math,' I said.

'Ah. I'm afraid I can't help you there,' he smiled. 'Math was never my strong suit.'

'Me either,' I sighed, leaning back in my chair. 'I'm terrible at it.'

'I'm sure you're not that bad,' he said, leaning on the back of a chair.

I rifled through my papers, pulling out my most recent math test. I handed it to him and he looked down at the grade written in big red letters.

'D minus,' he read. 'Okay, so maybe you *are* terrible at it.'

I laughed. 'It just doesn't stick with me,' I admitted.

'Maybe if you didn't daydream so much,' he said, handing the test back to me.

'I don't daydream,' I lied.

He cocked an eyebrow, his expression sardonic. 'You get this glazed look over your eyes all the time. Sometimes I worry you're having a stroke.'

I rolled my eyes and continued packing up my books. As I slung the bag over my shoulder, Mr. Stone looked around to make sure we were alone.

'Can I give you a ride home?' he asked.

My knees felt weak. 'Are you sure that's wise?'

'Everyone has gone home for the day,' he replied. 'I'll drive around the corner and you can meet me there.'

There was something about his desire for secrecy that made my skin prickle. 'Okay,' I agreed.

I left the library before Mr. Stone, who exited a few paces behind me. He walked towards the teacher's car park as I exited through the front gates.

Chapter Six

As I walked along the school's road I felt as though I was in a dream, or a visitor in another person's body. I couldn't feel my legs as I walked. Perhaps I was floating. I had to check my feet to make sure they weren't transparent.

Mr. Stone's car rumbled past and turned the corner where I knew he'd be waiting for me. I glanced around; the school's street was almost deserted. Only a few students lingered out the front of the school but they hadn't paid me any attention.

His car idled beside the curb, and I quickly ran to it, jumping inside and closing the door. I felt as though I was breaking the law, simply by being with him. He pulled away at once and sped down the street a little too fast for my liking. I gripped the door-handle, feeling extremely tense.

'You took Sadie home on Wednesday,' I said as we trundled along.

'I know. I was there,' he replied.

I didn't smile at his joke. I was jealous, but I didn't want him to know that.

'What did she say to you?' I asked.

'Nothing important,' he replied a little too quickly.

'Yeah right,' I said, my tone dripping with sarcasm.

'What was I supposed to do?' he chuckled. 'The girl wanted a lift home-'

'You could have said no.'

'And let her walk home in the dark? Any decent person would have obliged.'

I glared at him, and for the first time since I'd gotten in the car, he glanced my way. Seeing my expression seemed to slacken his resolve.

'She talked about class,' he said finally. 'And how much she enjoyed the way I taught.'

'She likes you,' I said at once.

Mr. Stone shifted uncomfortably, but did not respond.

'Did she flirt with you?' I asked.

He chewed the inside of his lip. 'I think so.'

'You think so?' I repeated.

'I don't know,' he said, a little annoyed. 'I don't have a manual on the way girls mind's work.'

'Well, what did she *do*?' I asked.

'She kept doing this.' He indicated to his chest, trying to represent breasts.
'She kept pulling her top down to reveal more ... cleavage.'

I almost laughed at how awkward he was. What grown man couldn't talk about breasts?

'She does that,' I said. 'She's very popular with the boys.'

'She's just a girl,' said Mr. Stone. 'A child.'

A child. Sadie was two months older than I. Did he think I was a child too?

'She's had sex,' I said. 'Most girls in my grade have.'

'Have you?' he asked.

I stared at him in disbelief.

'I shouldn't have asked that,' he said at once.

'No,' I said.

'I'm sorry.'

'No ... I mean ... I'm a virgin.'

Mr. Stone glanced at me quickly before focusing on the road again. 'You're not like the other girls,' he said. 'You're different.'

'Am I?' I asked, my fist curling around my backpack. Why was he torturing me like this?

He nodded, and I could see beads of sweat forming on his brow. He was not comfortable with me, or this conversation. He looked like a frightened puppy, trapped in a room with a violent owner.

His silence made me feel dizzy. I wanted to reach over and place my hand on his, but I was a coward. I wouldn't be able to handle his rejection.

Before I knew it, we were at my house, and I was disappointed to find that both of my parent's cars were pulled into the driveway, and the inside lights were on.

'Looks like someone is home,' said Mr. Stone, shrinking in his chair.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'They never pay me much attention.'

'You don't talk about your parents very fondly,' he said with a frown.

I shrugged. 'They're ... busy.'

Busy cheating on each other, I thought.

Mr. Stone leaned across me and opened the glove compartment. I watched as he dug through the assortment of unusual things in there; a bow tie, sunglasses, breath-mints, crumpled receipts, pens, and a notebook. He grabbed the notebook and tore out a page, scribbling something upon it. He handed the page to me and I looked at what he'd written.

'It's my cell phone number,' he said.

I stared at the digits as though they were the most valuable thing I'd ever seen.

'If you ever need someone to talk to,' he said.

'Thank you.' I pocketed the paper.

'I'll ... see you on Monday,' said Mr. Stone, chewing on his lip.

'Thanks for the lift,' I said.

'Anytime,' he replied.

Be careful, I thought. I may take you up on that offer.

I hopped out of the car and gave him a last wave before running up the garden path.

When I entered my house I could hear talking coming from the dining room, so I went to find my parents.

They were sitting together, which was an unusual sight in itself, and they appeared to be in deep discussion.

'Hey,' I said, standing in the doorway, smiling.

'Oh, hello Rose.' My mother's smile was strained.

'What's going on?' I asked, walking over to the dining table and picking an apple out of the fruit bowl. I looked to my father, who I hadn't spoken to in a few days. He had large bags under his eyes, but he too was smiling.

'Why don't you sit down?' said my father, pointing to an empty chair. 'Your mother and I would like to talk to you.'

I froze with the apple halfway to my mouth. 'What have I done?'

'Nothing,' my mother reassured me. 'Sit.'

I did as I was told and slid into the vacant seat, looking between my parents.

'There's something your mother and I would like to discuss with you, Rose,' said my father, interlacing his fingers upon the tabletop.

'What?' I looked at him. 'Has someone died?'

‘No, it’s nothing like that,’ said my father. ‘It’s difficult to say, so I’ll just come right out with it.’ He took a deep breath before continuing. ‘You probably saw this coming, but your mother and I have decided that it is best if we go our separate ways from now on. Of course, this doesn’t mean we love you any less, but it will affect your living arrangements from here on in.’

I stared at my father, before looking at my mother.

‘You’re getting a divorce?’ I asked her.

‘You seem surprised, dear,’ said my mother.

I wasn’t shocked, not really. I knew they’d both engaged in affairs right from the beginning of their marriage. I’d just assumed neither cared.

‘When did you decide this?’ I asked.

‘We decided it a couple of months ago,’ my father admitted.

‘*Months?*’ I repeated. ‘It took you this long to tell me?’

My father leaned back in his chair. ‘We needed to sort through some things before everything was made final. I’ve spent the last few weeks meeting with real estate agents, and looking for somewhere to live.’

‘You’re moving out?’ I asked. ‘But ... this is your house too.’

‘We are going to sell this house, Rose,’ said my mother. ‘And split everything between us.’

‘But that means I have to move too,’ I said, becoming panicked. ‘I don’t want to move.’

‘Don’t jump to conclusions, Rose,’ said my father. ‘Your mother has decided to move into a two-bedroom apartment closer to work as she is happy with her job in the city.’ My mother’s office was a forty-five minute drive away from our current home.

‘Into the city?’ My mouth hung open in disbelief. The joys of my ride home with Mr. Stone were completely wiped from my mind.

‘I, on the other hand will be moving out of state to take a promotion I’ve been offered,’ my father finished.

‘Out of *state*?’

They both nodded in unison.

‘We feel you are old enough to make your own decisions, Rose,’ my father continued. ‘I know it’s hard with your ... um ... illness, but we want to make the

transition as easy as possible for you. So it's up to you where you live. Of course, you can visit the other parent on weekends-

'But I want to live *here*, in this town,' I said tapping my finger on the tabletop. 'I have a part-time job, and friends at school-'

'We understand that it's inconvenient,' said my mother. 'But as you know your ... condition has put a lot of strain on our marriage, and we feel it's for the best.'

'So it's *my* fault?' I asked.

'No, sweetheart. It's not your fault. You know that.'

'If I could get better, I would,' I said angrily. 'You think I like this? You think I ... I like what I become?'

'No, of course not,' my mother said quickly. 'But maybe it will be easier for us to handle your condition if your father and I take it in turns to-'

'No!' I said, standing up, tears stinging my eyes. 'I want to stay *here*!'

I didn't give my parents a chance to respond. I stormed from the room and marched down the hallway towards my bedroom where I slammed the door angrily several times. Tears now streaming down my face, I flopped face-first into my pillow and sobbed for a good half-an-hour.

I wasn't crying because my family was being torn apart, I was crying because I was going to be uprooted from my home town, just when things seemed to be getting better.

I cried for several hours, until my eyes were red and puffy. Eventually, I fell asleep.

Chapter Seven

Saturday – 11 days to go

When I awoke in the early hours of Saturday morning I was confused as to why I was still wearing shoes, and clothes. It took several minutes of the previous evening to return to my memory.

Bleary eyed, I dug around in my pockets for my cell-phone, to check the time. Instead my hand closed around the piece of paper Mr. Stone had given me the previous evening. I unfolded it and stared at the digits.

I didn't hesitate. I found my phone and instantly saved his number to my contact list under 'S' for Stone.

Would he mind if I called him? After all, he'd said I could if I needed to talk. But was it too soon?

I stared at his name on my phone for several minutes before deciding against it.

It was nine o'clock in the morning, so I got up and poured myself some cereal in the kitchen. My father's car was gone, which meant my mother was still home, as they rarely went anywhere together anymore.

I was right; I heard the toilet flush and my mother emerged wearing only her silk dressing gown.

'Morning sweetheart,' she said, running a hand through her disheveled hair.

I ignored her and stuffed a spoonful of cereal into my mouth, leaning against the kitchen counter.

'I'm sorry about last night,' she continued, standing a few feet away from me.

I paused halfway through another mouthful. 'You're sorry?' I asked, disbelievingly.

'Yes, of course.'

'That's all you have to say to me?' I said with raised eyebrows.

'What do you want me to say, Rose? You know we haven't been happy for a long while-'

'Since my attack,' I interrupted.

My mother pursed her lips. 'Don't make this about you,' she said.

'I didn't,' I said. '*You* did.'

'Rose, your father and I wish to go our separate ways. Lots of couples get divorced, it's not uncommon. These things happen.'

'I don't want to leave Halfway,' I said. 'It's safe here. It's *quiet*.'

'You'll be safe in the city with me,' said my mother. 'I'll take care of your condition.'

'Like you took care of me when I was twelve? That day you and dad stayed out the whole night and forgot that I was sick?'

She didn't like it when I talked about that period of time. They'd apologized countless times for their carelessness. But I couldn't forget.

I'd woken up in the woods, only twelve years old, completely naked with no recollection of the night before. My fever had taken me completely during the night.

'I'll never let that happen again,' my mother said.

'You can't promise that,' I said. 'All you think about is yourself.'

'One time!' she yelled angrily. 'I wasn't there *one time*!'

'That's all it takes,' I said, my nostrils flaring angrily. 'One mistake. I will not move to the city. There are too many people. Too much going on-'

'Fine,' my mother snapped. 'Stay here then. See if I care.' And with that she stormed from the room.

'Oh, really mature!' I yelled after her. 'Just walk away.'

It was Saturday, and as usual I had no plans. No one ever asked to see me. I was surprised, however, when Estelle sent me a text-message that morning.

Party tonight, kiddo. I'll pick you up at eight.

Estelle was probably the only person I could tolerate, but I still couldn't imagine myself hanging out with her away from work, let alone at a party. I sent a polite message back.

Uh, not really my thing, Estelle. Thanks, though.

After that, I went for a quick shower, got dressed, and plaited my hair. Checking my phone, I found that Estelle had left me another text

I wasn't asking. See you at eight.

Would she really show up without warning? Not only that but Estelle was a lot older than me, and was sure to attend a party full of adults, with alcohol.

I bit down on my lip and thought carefully about it. After the argument with my mother I was feeling rebellious; she'd never allow me to go to an adult's party with alcohol, but at that moment I didn't care.

Fuck it, I thought. *I'm going*. Perhaps the worry would snap my parents to their senses.

See you at eight, I sent back to Estelle.

Dress older, Estelle replied.

I was a ball of nerves by seven thirty. I did not do well in crowds, and had a tendency to be rude, or dislike almost everyone I met. I was not a social person. I was a different species.

My parents weren't aware that I was going out; I'd been hiding in my room for the last hour while I got ready.

What did girls wear to parties?

I never wore makeup; I didn't see the point, but I knew people liked to dress up when they attended these things.

Being a bit of a tomboy, my wardrobe was limited to t-shirts and jeans. However, I was a similar size to my mother so I decided to scour her wardrobe while she was in the living room.

I rifled through her dresses, which were plenty, until I came across one that wasn't too revealing. It was red and stopped just above the knees. The neckline wasn't too low-cut, and the sleeves came to the elbows. I refused point-blank to

show my legs so I thieved a pair of black stockings and stuffed them into my pocket.

I didn't own any cosmetics, so I also stole some foundation, mascara, and eyeliner. Feeling bold, I also took a stick of red lipstick.

By eight o'clock I was ready, and feeling extremely self-conscious. I felt ridiculous wearing the red dress and red lipstick. I'd attempted to do my hair, but it was so unruly, I left it as a wavy, disheveled mess.

At five past eight a horn sounded in the street, and I knew it was Estelle waiting for me. I took a deep breath and left my bedroom, clutching a tiny handbag my mother had bought me on a previous birthday.

I slipped out of my bedroom, and could hear the television blaring in the sitting room. I crept down the hallway with my shoes in my hand; they had a slight heel, and I didn't want to be heard as I walked across the floorboards. To my surprise I reached the front door successfully and was able to pry it open without any noise.

Once outside I ran down the garden path to meet Estelle in her violently purple car.

'Woah!' Estelle looked me up and down as I jumped into the passenger seat.

'What?' I said a little defensively as put on the shoes I'd been carrying.

'You look *hot*,' she said approvingly. 'Red suits you.'

'Uh ... thanks,' I said, tucking my hair behind my ears. 'Do I look older?' I asked.

'At least eighteen,' she said with a wink.

'So, um, where is this party?'

'It's at a friends house,' said Estelle, putting her car into gear and pulling away from my house.

I was extremely nervous. 'I've never been to a party before.'

'Never?' Estelle asked, raising one of her penciled eyebrows.

'Well, once when I was ten, I went to a party at chuck-e-cheese because my mother made me. It didn't go so well.'

'Hon, that's not a real party.'

I shrugged. 'It's something.'

Estelle laughed. 'I can tell you don't go out much. That's why I decided to bring you along.'

'Are you sure it's okay that I attend?'

'Yeah! There will be heaps of cool people there.'

'I'll be younger than everyone,' I said. Estelle was twenty-five, so I assumed her friends would be a similar age.

Estelle laughed. 'Maybe in physical years, but not mentality.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I asked.

'You don't act like a normal seventeen year old girl,' she said, glancing sideways at me. 'And my friends certainly don't act their age.'

'Don't leave me alone, okay? I won't know anyone.'

Estelle gave me a knowing look. 'I'll introduce you to everyone.'

'You won't be drinking, right? I'll be able to get home, won't I?'

Estelle nodded. 'I don't drink and drive, sweetheart.'

Relieved, I leaned back in the passenger seat and allowed myself to be taken to the party.

When we arrived I knew at once that it was been a bad idea. The music was loud, and many people were on the front porch, drinking and smoking. The smell of marijuana reached my nostrils; I recognized the smell from the girl's bathroom at school. Sadie had been caught smoking it before.

'Maybe this isn't a good idea,' I said, clutching my handbag and staring at the house.

Estelle squeezed my knee comfortingly. 'Trust me, kiddo. Okay? You're going to have a great time.'

'If I don't ... will you take me home?'

'I'll be at your beck and call,' she promised.

I wasn't used to wearing heels. Even though they were only two inches high, I felt as though I was walking like a Velociraptor.

Extremely self-conscious, I followed in Estelle's shadow as she led me towards the house-party. Everyone seemed to know her, and greeted Estelle cheerily. It was a small house with dated furnishings, and a thick cloud of cigarette smoke hung in the air.

‘Hey Estelle!’ A man in his early twenties with tattoos and long, black hair gave her a high-five. ‘Who’s the kid?’

‘Hey Spider, this is my friend Rose,’ said Estelle, snaking an arm around my waist.

‘A date?’ the man called Spider asked, eyeing me.

‘You wish,’ Estelle sneered at him and steered me away. ‘You stay away from her, okay?’

Spider raised his hands in defeat. ‘As you say.’

Estelle dragged me towards a table laden with beverages where she poured herself a cola. She offered me an alcoholic drink but I refused.

‘Who was that guy?’ I asked.

‘An ex,’ replied Estelle, ‘and a sleaze bag.’

Next, Estelle pulled a packet of cigarettes from her pocket and put it between her lips. ‘Want one?’ she asked, holding out the pack.

I stared at the cigarettes for a moment before quickly shaking my head. There was far too much temptation at this party for my liking. What had I got myself into?

‘C’mon, kiddo,’ Estelle said, lighting her cigarette. ‘You’re at a party. Live a little.’

‘Maybe next time,’ I lied.

Estelle shrugged and put the packet back into her pocket before taking a long drag and blowing the smoke out of her nostrils. It was a strange sight with her septum piercing.

‘I’m the youngest person here,’ I said, shifting uncomfortably.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Estelle, peering through the packed house. ‘They look about your age, don’t they?’

I followed her gaze to see where she was pointing, and was shocked to see Sadie sitting on the couch, deep in conversation with a strange male.

‘I know her,’ I said, staring at Sadie.

‘Has she been to the café?’ Estelle asked, blowing smoke out of the corner of her mouth.

I nodded.

‘Thought she was familiar. She comes to most parties.’

I watched Sadie as she sipped her drink and accepted a joint from another female. I hadn't been aware of this side of her.

'Aren't you going to say hello?' asked Estelle.

My feet moved of their own accord towards Sadie, until I was standing in front of her.

'Rose!' Sadie gasped, jumping up. 'What are you doing here?'

To my surprise she looked pleased to see me. Perhaps it was the marijuana.

'I was invited by Estelle,' I said, pointing over my shoulder to where Estelle stood at the drinks table. 'What are you doing here?'

Sadie waved a hand dismissively, which threw her off balance so she was forced to steady herself on the sofa. 'I get invited to *all* the parties,' she told me.

It seemed Sadie's male companion was growing tired of her lack of attention so he wandered off to find another willing female to receive his affections.

'Looks like you lost your friend,' I said, nodding after him.

'That's okay,' Sadie said, looking at something over my shoulder. 'I've found someone better.'

And with that she stalked off to pursue another companion.

'Here,' Estelle joined me, thrusting a drink into my hand. 'Drink up.'

'What is it?' I asked.

'Just cola,' she promised.

It didn't take long for Estelle to abandon me, leaving me standing alone, and awkward in a corner of the room.

Not long after, I was feeling dizzy and ill from all the smoke so I decided to get some fresh air. I sat on a bench in the backyard.

Spider, Estelle's ex-boyfriend made a beeline for me as soon as I sat down.

'Hello sweetheart,' he said, smiling and sitting next to me. 'You feeling all right?'

'Yes, it's just so smoky in there.'

'Enjoying yourself?' He asked, looking me up and down approvingly. His gaze made me feel ill.

'It's okay, I guess.'

Spider leaned towards me and inhaled deeply. 'Do you have a pet dog?' he asked.

'What? Why?' I said, my guard instantly raised.

'Oh, I can just smell canine on your clothes.'

I'd heard the jokes before; perhaps Sadie had put him up to it.

'You're saying I smell like a dog?' I asked.

Spider laughed. 'Don't you have a dog?'

'No,' I snapped. 'Do you know where Estelle is? I think I'm sick.'

'Estelle? Yeah. She's over there smoking a joint with my brother.' Spider pointed through a window into the house where I could clearly see Estelle, drinking and smoking. 'But you don't need her. I'll keep you company.' Spider put an arm around my shoulders.

Panic flared inside me and I jumped up at once. Estelle was under the influence of drugs and alcohol. How was I supposed to get home? I ran into the house and quickly found Estelle in the kitchen where I slapped the joint out of her hand.

'What are you doing?' I demanded, grabbing her drink too.

'Woah,' Estelle looked at me with extremely bloodshot eyes. 'What's the matter?'

'You're supposed to be *sober*,' I said angrily. 'I thought you were going to drive me home!'

'I will,' said Estelle. 'I'll be fine to drive.'

'Like hell you will,' I said.

'Don't worry, darling. You'll be fine,' said Spider, coming up behind me and snaking an arm around my waist. 'You can crash at my place for the night. I only live around the corner.'

I shrugged out of his grip. 'No thanks.'

'Come on sweetheart,' Spider crooned, leaning towards me.

'Back off Spider, she's only seventeen!' Estelle snapped.

'That's fine. I like a bit of fresh meat-'

I pushed myself away from Estelle and Spider.

I needed to find a familiar face. Sadie; she'd look after me. I didn't get far before Spider cornered me again.

'Hey, doll. Where are you going?' he asked, his hands on either side of my head.

'I-I don't feel well,' I said. 'I might go home.'

'Aw, baby. Don't go. I thought we could get to know each other.' He leaned towards me and I could smell the smoke on his breath.

'No,' I said firmly, pushing against his chest. 'I don't want-'

'Rose?' A familiar voice called my name.

A hand clamped down on Spider's shoulder right before he kissed me. Spider turned around to see who the intruder was.

'Wait your turn, mate,' he said to the unknown interrupter.

'Step away from the girl, please,' said the man.

That voice.

'I said wait your turn, buddy.'

Thwack!

The stranger punched Spider right on the nose, sending the black haired boy to the floor in a crumpled heap.

I yelped with fright and looked up at my savior.

'Mr. Stone?' I breathed.

It *was* him. He stood before me, his chest heaving as anger seemed to course through his veins. There could be no mistaking that mismatched attire.

'Christ, Rose. What are you doing here?' he asked, staring into my eyes.

'You ... you punched him!' I gasped, stepping over Spider, who was groaning in pain on the floor.

Mr. Stone grabbed me by the arm and began to pull me out of the house. 'This is no place for you,' he said.

'Estelle brought me,' I said, quickly, tripping over my own feet. The party-goers created a path for us to walk through as we headed for the exit.

'What were you thinking?' Mr. Stone snapped. 'You could have been hurt, or drugged. Or worse-'

'I'm sorry,' I said, unsure as to why I was apologizing. I'd done nothing wrong after all. 'Thank you, though.'

'What for?'

'For stopping him. I think he was going to kiss me.'

'I expected more from you, Rose.

'Where are we going?' I asked, hurrying to keep up with him.

'I'm taking you home,' he said as we stepped onto the lawn.

'No!' I stopped in my tracks, my eyes wide. 'I can't go home. Not yet.'

'Well you can't stay here,' he said. 'There's alcohol and drugs everywhere.'

'What are *you* doing here then?' I asked.

Mr. Stone sighed. 'I live next door, Rose. They invited me so I wouldn't complain about the noise to the police. You're lucky I arrived when I did.'

'You ... you live next door?' I asked. 'Can't we go there?'

Mr. Stone's spine stiffened and his nostrils flared. 'That's not a good idea,' he said.

'Why not? Please, Mr. Stone ... I don't want to go home just yet.'

Mr. Stone licked his lips nervously and glanced around. 'All right ... just for an hour though, okay?'

Mr. Stone took my hand and led me to the left, towards a small house. We crossed over the garden of the party until we were on his property.

'This is your house?' I asked, looking at it.

It was small, with an overgrown lawn, and a beat-up garage, but that was definitely his car in the driveway. We walked up the garden path until we reached his porch. The fly-screen was hanging off its hinges, but the oak door behind it seemed solid. He opened the screen-door and unlocked it before leading me into the house.

Mr. Stone's home was far nicer on the inside. It seemed he had tried to make the best out of a bad situation. There was still no doubt in my mind though that he was not a rich man by any means.

'Come in here and sit down,' he said, leading me into the sitting room where he threw his keys and wallet onto the coffee table.

I took a seat on the sofa and stared at him.

'Do you want me to call your parents?' he asked.

'No!' I said at once. 'No, they don't know I'm out.'

'You went without permission?' he asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'What if something had happened to you? What am I saying? Something *did* happen to you. Some long-haired sleaze-ball tried to ... to-'

‘Spider,’ I said. ‘He wanted me to go to his house with him.’

‘Yeah, I bet he did,’ Mr. Stone growled. I’d never heard him talk like that before. ‘I should march back over there and grab that little shit by the throat-’

‘Don’t be mad,’ I pleaded, staring at him with wide eyes. Mr. Stone looked distressed, with one hand balled around a tuft of his own hair.

‘What if I hadn’t gone?’ he asked. ‘What would have happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ I muttered, staring at my knees.

‘How did you plan on getting home?’ he asked.

‘Estelle was supposed to take me.’

‘That pink haired girl from the café?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ I rubbed my arm, feeling foolish. ‘But she ended up drinking and smoking-’

‘And then what was your plan?’ he said, crossing his arms. I felt like I was being scolded by my father.

‘I don’t know, all right? I said thank you. What else do you want?’

Mr. Stone’s posture relaxed and he heaved a sigh. ‘I was just worried about you, that’s all.’

I leaned back in the sofa and closed my eyes, breathing deeply. I knew going to this party would be a mistake. This was why I hated going out.

‘Do you want a tea or coffee?’ he asked.

‘A coffee, please,’ I said.

‘I’ve only got instant coffee. Is that okay?’ he asked.

‘That’s fine,’ I said. It was better than nothing.

Mr. Stone retreated to the kitchen where I heard the tap running, and a kettle being placed on a stove.

My eyes fell to his wallet, which sat on the coffee table in front of me. I quickly glanced over my shoulder to make sure he wasn’t coming back, before reaching over and grabbing it.

I flipped the wallet open and rifled through the contents. The first thing I found was his drivers license.

Thomas William Stone.

Strange, I’d never known his first name. He’d always been Mr. Stone to me.

Seeing his date of birth I was quickly able to calculate his age at thirty-two.

‘Find anything interesting?’ Mr. Stone asked as he re-entered the room. I could hear the kettle still boiling in the kitchen.

‘Sorry,’ I said quickly, throwing the wallet back onto the table.

‘It’s fine,’ he said, picking it up and rummaging through it himself. ‘There’s nothing too revealing in here.’

‘I didn’t mean to pry,’ I said. ‘I just ... I didn’t know your first name.’

‘Didn’t you?’ he asked.

I shook my head.

‘My name is Tom. Pleased to meet you, Rose.’ He held out a hand, which I took. He squeezed my hand gently as he shook it. I couldn’t help but smile.

‘Hi Tom,’ I said. ‘You’re thirty-two?’

‘Is that old?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I said.

‘It’s fifteen years older than you,’ he replied. ‘Almost twice your age.’

‘Not forever,’ I said. ‘When you’re forty I’ll be twenty-five.’

‘You’re making me feel old,’ he said disapprovingly.

‘When you’re fifty, I’ll be thirty-five,’ I continued. ‘Sixty and forty-five. See? It’s not such a big difference.’

‘It’s big enough. I guess I’ll just have to wait for you to catch up to me,’ he joked.

‘What are you waiting for?’ I asked, leaning forwards.

I hadn’t meant for it to sound provocative. I quickly averted my gaze, realizing how inappropriate it had sounded.

Mr. Stone perched himself on the edge of the sofa. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a dress before.’

I looked down at the red number I was wearing. ‘Yeah ... it’s not really me, is it?’

‘You look very nice,’ he smiled, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

I stared at Mr. Stone, my heart as light as a feather. He stared back too, but we were interrupted by the kettle whistling noisily.

‘That’ll be the water ready,’ he said, jumping up and walking briskly into the kitchen.

I waited in the sitting room while he prepared the coffees, bringing me the drink in a chipped Christmas mug.

'Thanks,' I said, taking a sip. It was awful, but I drank it anyway. I was too used to the coffee at the café.

'So why did you go to the party?' Mr. Stone asked, sitting next to me on the sofa, which sunk and creaked under his weight.

'I needed to get out of the house,' I said. 'Away from my parents.'

'Trouble at home?' he asked.

'You could say that,' I replied.

'I'm here if you need to talk, Rose,' he offered.

'Thank you,' I said, 'for being with me.'

Mr. Stone looked down at his mug, his expression guilty. 'Rose ... you can't tell anyone about this, okay?'

I nodded. 'I know.'

I don't know what made me do it, but I reached over and placed my hand over his. I waited for him to move away, but he didn't. Instead, he stared at our hands for a moment before entwining his fingers with mine. My throat felt dry, and my skin prickled with anticipation. I couldn't believe it. He was holding my hand, his thumb gently caressing my pinkie-finger ever so lightly. I heard him gulp audibly, his Adam's apple bobbing like a snake swallowing a bird. He was terrified.

Stop it, I thought to myself. *This is so wrong.*

Mr. Stone beat me to the punch. 'I'll take you home,' he said, releasing my hand and standing up quickly.

I nodded and placed my half-empty mug on the coffee table, slightly disappointed. I didn't want to leave.

'Okay,' I said, standing also.

We walked to his car, which was parked in the driveway. I could hear the party next door was still in full swing. On the front porch was Estelle, who spotted me as I opened Mr. Stone's car door.

'Rose!' she said, calling after me. 'What are you doing? I've been looking for you!'

I ignored her and got into the car.

‘Are you all right?’ Mr. Stone asked, sliding into the passenger seat and starting the engine.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I’ll be attending parties with Estelle any time soon.’

‘I approve,’ Mr. Stone smiled as he put the car into reverse and backed out of the driveway.

‘Unless you live next door,’ I smiled, giving him a quick sideways glance.

Mr. Stone allowed himself a guilty smile before shifting into first gear and rumbling down the road.

I watched him as he drove; the streetlamps passed over his face, illuminating every line. He allowed me to watch him throughout the entire journey without saying a word.

When we arrived at my house I leaned over and kissed Mr. Stone on the cheek. He bowed his head and stared at the steering wheel.

‘Thanks Tom,’ I said softly before hopping out of the car and tiptoeing towards the house.

Chapter Eight

Monday – 9 days to go

Mr. Stone, *no* ... Thomas, paid me extra attention during the next English lesson. He called upon me to answer almost every question, and praised me excessively when I got it right. I couldn't help but smile. It felt as though I had a friend for the first time. Each and every time I saw him looking at me, a guilty expression crossed his face, as though he'd been caught doing something embarrassing.

I was equally as guilty. While we were meant to be working quietly, I raised my hand to ask for assistance, and Tom knelt by my desk, his body very close to mine. I could feel the electricity passing between us.

His hand rested on my desk as he 'explained' the latest essay to me. Of course, I understood it perfectly well, and he knew it.

It took me all of the courage I could muster to gently touch his hand with my pinkie-finger. I saw goose bumps erupt all over his skin at the feather-light touch. I didn't move, and the inch of skin remained pressed against Mr. Stone's hand. It was so subtle, but so erotic I could feel my loins screaming.

He was so close I could hear him breathing. The only other sound in the room was the scratching of pens as the other students worked. No one else had noticed his proximity to me as he helped me with the essay. However, I thought I saw Sadie watching me out of the corner of her eye.

I was right. Come lunch time, Sadie cornered me in the playground, a falsely sweet smile on her face.

'Hey, Rose. I missed you at the party,' she said.

'Yeah, I left kind of early,' I admitted.

'I know, your pink haired friend was looking for you.'

'Yeah ... I'll see her tonight at the café, I guess.'

To be honest, I didn't really want to see Estelle. I was annoyed at her for drinking when she'd promised not to. However, I was also thankful, as it had given me more time with Thomas.

'I saw you leave with Mr. Stone,' said Sadie, watching my reaction carefully.

I didn't give her the satisfaction. I shrugged. 'Yeah, I was stranded so he offered to take me home.'

'How nice of him. You know he's given me a lift home before too?' She smiled smugly.

My jaw tensed. 'Yeah ... yeah, I know. He's nice like that, isn't he?'

Sadie nodded. 'I've got a bit of a crush on him, to be honest.' Her steel gray eyes darted between my own amber ones, analyzing my expression.

I smiled. 'Yeah, I thought so.'

'What do you think I should do to get him to notice me?' Sadie asked, sitting down on the bench and patting the space next to her.

I sat down awkwardly. 'Erm, I don't know, Sadie. I've never had a boyfriend, remember?'

Sadie rolled her eyes. 'Come on, Rose. Help me out here. You're smart, like him.'

'He's a teacher ... you shouldn't pursue it,' I said cautiously.

Sadie waved a hand as though it didn't matter. 'Oh, don't be silly. No one will find out.'

I licked my lips and shifted nervously. 'I don't think Mr. Stone would fall victim to your ... uh-' I couldn't find the right word to describe it.

'Affections?' Sadie smirked.

It was as if she knew something was going on between Mr. Stone and I, and sought to make me jealous. Not that anything *was* going on, or ever would. Regardless, it was working.

'I was thinking of asking Mr. Stone if I can get extra credit,' Sadie continued. 'You know ... so I can be alone with him after class.'

'Oh.' I burned with jealousy.

When I arrived at the café for my shift with Estelle, she apologized profusely for Saturday night. I begrudgingly forgave her and got on with my shift. She knew I was still annoyed, so she did not push the subject too much.

‘So ... who was that man you left with on Saturday?’ she asked, wiping down the tables.

‘My teacher,’ I said. ‘He lives next door.’

‘That cute one that always comes in here?’ Estelle asked.

I chewed on the inside of my lip. ‘Yeah.’

‘Be careful,’ she said.

I raised my eyebrows. ‘Be careful?’

‘He’s an older man, and a teacher at that. You don’t know what he’s up to. He could be one of those predators you see on dateline.’

‘He’s not like that.’ I said. ‘We’re just friends.’

Estelle gave me a pitying look. ‘Oh, honey. Men don’t have female friends unless they want something.’

‘Mr. Stone is different. He’s kind, and mature.’

Estelle put her hands on her hips. ‘So why does he only come here when you’re working?’

‘Does he?’ I asked, feigning disinterest.

Estelle nodded. ‘Uh huh. He never shows up when it’s any of the other girls. Monday’s and Wednesdays, that’s it.’

I shrugged. ‘He said he likes my coffee.’

‘Rose, you’re smarter than that. I can see that you like him. Just promise me you’ll be careful, okay?’

‘Like you have such good taste in men,’ I snapped. ‘Your *friend* Spider decided he wanted to have a go at me. *You’re* the one dating sleaze bags, not me.’

After that, my friendship with Estelle was fractured. We were polite to each other, but not as close as we’d once been.

But Estelle was right. I did like Mr. Stone.

I was falling for him. *Fast*. I couldn’t help it. I was drawn to him like a bee to a flower, and I feared that it was becoming increasingly obvious. He was a good man and I did not wish to complicate his life with my childish notions of love.

He was responsible, and would spurn my advances at once. I could feel it in my gut. So I endured the torture without speaking a word of it.

Meanwhile, my parent's divorce had not left my mind since they'd told me about it, though I hadn't said anything to anyone yet. They hadn't even noticed my absence on Saturday night, and I'd been able to return to my bedroom with them none the wiser.

Who was I meant to talk to about my issues at home? Would Mr. Stone open his arms and embrace me when I confessed my distress? The thought of his arms around me left me momentarily brain dead.

Numerous times I considered using the number he'd given me. I wanted to hear his kind voice, speaking soothing words of comfort.

Tuesday – 8 days to go

I couldn't believe Sadie. I wanted to grab her by the hair and slam her stupid face against the desk. I'd never imagined hurting someone so badly before.

She was doing everything within her power to make sure Mr. Stone's attention was on her for the entire lesson, which included asking him if she could help him with anything to earn extra credit. I was surprised I didn't spontaneously combust when she asked him.

'Yeah, of course Sadie. Just hang back after class and we can work something out,' Mr. Stone told her.

My skin burned at the thought of them being alone together. I wouldn't allow it.

At the end of the lesson, I hung back too.

'What are you doing?' Sadie asked me with narrowed eyes as I remained in my seat.

'I'm interested in extra credit, too,' I lied. It was so obvious what I was doing, I wasn't sure why I bothered to lie about it.

With a smirk, Sadie flicked her hair back and walked to the front of the class, where Mr. Stone was wiping the day's work off the board. She perched herself on the edge of his desk, her legs dangling back and forth.

'Right – ah, Rose. You're interested in extra-credit too?'

'Sure, why not?' I said, waving a hand.

Get off his desk you slut, I screamed inside my head.

'It was my idea,' Sadie said quickly, leaning forwards so her bosom hung out of her blouse.

'Well, that's great. It's great you're both taking some initiative in class.'

Mr. Stone crossed the room to his cupboard and pulled out two copies of 'Great Expectations' by Chares Dickens.

'Have either of you read this?' he asked, handing Sadie a copy, and placing the other on my desk.

'No,' said Sadie, pulling a face as she looked at it.

'Yes,' I said.

'Really?' Mr. Stone seemed impressed. 'Can you summarize for me?'

I licked my lips nervously. It had been years since I'd read it.

'Um, it's a coming of age story, isn't it? about an orphan boy who is adopted into a blacksmith family?'

'Right,' Mr. Stone smiled at me.

Sadie glared.

'I can't wait to read it,' she said pointedly.

'Great!' Mr. Stone clapped his hands together. 'Well ... if you can write a report summarizing the plot, and its themes ... let's say ... a thousand words?'

'Easy,' I grinned. It really would be a piece of cake. Sadie, however, looked miserable. Clearly this encounter had not gone to plan.

'Excellent,' said Mr. Stone. 'Well, you better be off to lunch, you two.'

'Thanks Mr. Stone,' I said, getting up from my seat and slinging my bag over my shoulder.

Sadie slid from Mr. Stone's desk and took a few steps, only to drop her book.

'Oops!' She bent over in front of Mr. Stone and I to retrieve the novel. My jaw almost hit the ground.

She wasn't wearing any knickers.

He saw it too.

Mr. Stone looked away, embarrassed, his face beetroot-red. I literally began to shake with anger. *What a slut!*

Thursday – 6 days to go

I was a mess. My father was meeting with his real estate agent that evening, and my mother was out on a date with a co-worker. What was worse; my father didn't seem phased by this at all.

I sat in my room, upset and panicky. I didn't want to leave Halfway; I'd miss him too much. Thomas. I needed him. I wanted him.

I wanted him more than anything in the world, and he needed to know it. I couldn't hold on to this secret any longer. It boiled inside me like poison.

But how would I do it?

I stared at Mr. Stone's name in my phone for ages, contemplating on whether I should call him or not. What if he was busy?

No. I wouldn't call him. I'd text him instead, that way he could deny my offer if he wished.

Can we go for a drive? I asked.

He responded almost instantly, sending butterflies exploding through my stomach.

See you in 5 minutes, it read.

I wasn't sure how, but I knew that Mr. Stone would drive to see me in the middle of the night if I asked him to. Perhaps that was vain of me to assume.

I slipped out of the house while my father was still on the phone and waited in the street for Mr. Stone to pick me up.

When he rumbled to a groaning halt by the curb he could tell instantly that I was upset.

'Oh, no,' he said as soon as I got into the passenger seat. 'What's the matter, Rose?'

'Get me away from here,' I said to him.

He drove and I didn't ask where we were going.

Ten minutes passed in silence until we were on the outskirts of town, on an old road that was surrounded by forest. He picked up the mud with his tires as he pulled over on the side of the road.

'You're not going to murder me and ditch my body in the forest, are you?' I asked.

He laughed. 'No, nothing like that. It's calm here. I like it.'

I looked out at the forest. 'I hate it.'

Mr. Stone raised his eyebrows. 'Why?'

'I was attacked by a wild animal when I was nine while hiking in the woods with my parents,' I said.

'Shit. Sorry, I didn't mean to-'

'It's fine,' I said. 'It was a long time ago.'

He gave me a pitying look. 'You look upset,' he said.

I nodded and stared at my hands in my lap. I could feel the burn of tears in the back of my throat, but sniffed them away.

'My parents are getting a divorce,' I told him.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said. 'Were you expecting it?'

'I guess I should have,' I replied. 'They've been having affairs since I was nine.'

'Wow, okay. What took them so long?'

'I suppose they haven't really been together for years. Not in the romantic sense, anyway.'

'That's sad,' he said. 'It must have been tough growing up.'

It had been, but not for the reasons he imagined.

I relayed the conversation I'd had with my mother and father that night. His brow furrowed as I talked, and he looked deeply concerned.

'They said ... my ... my condition-'

'Condition?' Mr. Stone repeated.

I had already said too much. 'I get sick.' I chose my words carefully. 'A lot. My mother said it put a strain on the marriage.'

‘That doesn’t sound very fair,’ he said. ‘Blaming you for something you can’t help.’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t want to leave Halfway,’ I said. ‘Things are just starting to get better. It’s safe here. It’s small, and quiet. I’m finally coming to terms with my illness ...’

‘When you say illness,’ he said slowly. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s a long story,’ I said. ‘But don’t worry ... it’s not contagious.’ It was a half truth, at least. He was safe as long as he wasn’t around me during an episode. If I bit him, or scratched him during that time ... it was another story.

Mr. Stone reached over and grasped my hand, squeezing gently. I was sure he only meant it as a friendly gesture, but goose bumps erupted over my skin at his touch.

‘Thank you Mr. Stone,’ I said softly, ‘for being here with me. It really means a lot. Not many people would drop everything to comfort me.’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I’d do anything.’

My stomach did cartwheels. Was he implying what I hoped?

Mr. Stone looked down at our hands, uncertainty flashing across his eyes. ‘But please don’t mention this to your friends, Rose. It would be considered, uh ... unethical for-’

‘I understand.’

He smiled warmly, his eyes twinkling. ‘Thank you.’

‘Unethical, like Sadie’s stunt after class on Tuesday.’

Mr. Stone visibly shuddered in disgust; this made me very happy.

‘It’s so sad,’ he said, ‘when young girls extort themselves like that. Is her self esteem really so low that she needs to flash her own teacher?’

I shrugged, pleased that he disapproved. ‘Sadie has always been ... adventurous.’

‘Well, she is certainly not my type,’ Mr. Stone smirked. ‘I think I’m going to have to watch my back.’

‘It seems so,’ I said with a smile. ‘She is quite adamant to have you for herself.’

‘I’m just glad you were there,’ he chuckled. ‘God knows what she would have done if we’d been alone.’

Jealously bubbled in the pit of my stomach at the very thought. 'So you didn't enjoy the view?' I pressed.

Mr. Stone pretended to gag, and I laughed a little too loud.

'Absolutely not. I was *mortified*.'

'She's eighteen, you know?'

'Irrelevant,' he waved a hand.

'Well, I'm glad you disapproved. Most men would have taken advantage of such a situation.'

'I am not most men,' he countered, cocking one eyebrow and giving me a look to die for.

We smiled at each other for several moments, our eye contact lasting far longer than should be allowed for a student and teacher.

'No, you aren't,' I agreed.

'My taste in women is far better than Sadie Deveraux, I can assure you.'

'Is it just?' I asked, my lips curling into a smile. 'Do tell.'

Mr. Stone's smile faltered. 'I like my women to have a mind of their own – to be witty. Like you.'

My throat closed up. *Like me?*

'You're an amazing girl,' he said suddenly.

His use of the word *girl* made my stomach twist painfully.

'Am I?' I asked.

'Of course.'

'A girl?'

He smiled knowingly. 'An amazing *woman*,' he corrected himself.

'No one has ever told me that before,' I said.

'I don't believe that,' he smiled. 'You're clever, and beautiful, and damn witty.'

Mr. Stone's jaw tensed as he realized what he was saying.

'Beautiful?' I asked, the word escaping as nothing more than a whisper.

'Don't you know?' he asked.

My heart thundered as I stared at him. *Oh please, my mind begged. Please tell me what is going on in that head of yours.*

'D-don't I know what?' I asked.

‘Don’t you know what you’re *doing* to me?’ He said as though I was torturing him.

‘What?’ My skin stung and my head swam with the possibilities.

‘Rose, I-’ He paused to collect his thoughts. ‘I’ve felt this ... this pull towards you since day one. I can’t explain it.’

He didn’t need to explain it, because I felt it too. His eyes, his smile and his scent had me drawn in.

I placed a shaking hand over his, which was still on the steering wheel. He looked at our hands for a moment before allowing me to thread my fingers through his. I could feel his pulse in between each of my fingers.

Mr. Stone inhaled deeply. ‘Christ,’ he muttered, shutting his eyes tightly.

‘What’s the matter?’ I breathed.

‘That ... that scent. The way you smell-’

I suddenly became very self-conscious. Bullies at school often accused me of smelling like wet dog. I sniffed my shirt, but I smelled perfectly normal.

‘What is it?’ I said defensively. ‘I showered this morning-’

Mr. Stone laughed, and I felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

‘No,’ he said with a small smile. ‘You smell *amazing*.’

‘I do?’

‘Absolutely. You always do.’

I never wore perfume, only regular home brand antiperspirant.

‘It makes me dizzy,’ he confessed. ‘It’s intoxicating.’

‘What do I smell like?’ I asked, rather flushed.

Mr. Stone licked his lips as though he could taste me in the air. ‘Sweet,’ he said.

My cheeks burned crimson, and I wished he would look at me. I couldn’t believe this was happening.

‘I want to kiss you so very badly, Rose,’ Mr. Stone said under his breath. ‘But I can’t ... and it’s killing me.’

My heart hammered so loudly against my ribcage that I was sure Mr. Stone could hear it from where he sat.

Suddenly, I felt powerful. He wanted *me* ... and it terrified him.

‘Mr. Stone,’ I breathed, but he still didn’t look at me. ‘Tom.’

The sound of his name leaving my lips made a small groan escape him, as though the word was taboo.

‘Look at me,’ I said, my eyes fixated on him.

‘I can’t,’ he said, shaking his head.

Without hesitation I unbuckled my seat belt and leaned towards Mr. Stone, taking his chin in my hand and forcing him to look at me. He flinched, thinking that I was going to slap him. But he couldn’t have been more misguided.

I kissed him. *Hard*. I didn’t want to give him the opportunity to lean away and prevent it from happening so I pressed my mouth to his forcefully. My first kiss.

He froze, shocked by my sudden action. His hands remained on the steering wheel as though he was gripping onto his own self-control.

I moved my mouth against his, willing him to kiss me back. It was only when my tongue brushed against his lips that he responded.

Mr. Stone groaned, his hands falling away from the steering wheel and wrapping around my waist. I’d stolen what little restraint he’d had left.

He gripped me tightly as though I was the last thing in the world. He deepened the kiss, and I opened my mouth to allow him entrance. As our tongues met chills ran down my spine and fireworks exploded in the pit of my stomach. I forgot who, and where I was; my very skin was on fire.

When I broke away we were panting, and his lips were pink and swollen. His eyes darted across my face, studying each freckle and imperfection.

Suddenly, the realization of what had happened struck Mr. Stone and he leaned away from me, threading his fingers through his hair like he always did when stressed.

‘Shit,’ he muttered under his breath. ‘Shit, shit *shit*.’

I watched him calmly, my eyes following his lips as he spoke.

‘That shouldn’t have happened,’ he said, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. The look on his face was enough to break my heart. He hated himself.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, even though I wasn’t sorry at all.

Mr. Stone looked at me with wide eyes. ‘Why are *you* sorry?’ he said. ‘I brought you here ... I told you I wanted to kiss you. This is *my* fault.’ He thought he was some kind of manipulative predator.

‘Will you kiss me again?’ I asked.

He shook his head, biting his bottom lip. ‘No. No, I can’t. Absolutely not. It’s *wrong*.’

I ignored him and leaned forwards. He hesitated for only a moment before unbuckling his seatbelt with fumbling fingers and meeting me half way.

We held each other tightly; Mr. Stone moaned through the kiss, breathing heavily into my open mouth. I wrapped my arms around his neck and thread my fingers through his hair, gripping tightly. I didn’t want to let go.

‘Incredible,’ he muttered against my lips. My stomach writhed with affection for the man. ‘Absolutely incredible.’

I wasn’t sure how long we kissed for. It could have been seconds, or perhaps several hours. However long, it didn’t seem enough.

Eventually it had to end, and Mr. Stone said he would take me home. I agreed, reluctantly.

Through out the drive he seemed disoriented. I, however, was on top of the world.

My parents would have to drag me out of Halfway.

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