



CHAPTER ONE

THIS PARTY FEELS LIKE A PANIC ATTACK.

I can't breathe through the clouds of cigarette smoke. Vibrations from the stereo shake the ground beneath my boots. The green and blue strobe lights are disorienting.

"Rose!"

Gemma's voice cuts like a dagger through the music. She flashes a smile that lights up the dark chamber of drunk high school students. They clear a path for her. A pink striped jumpsuit hugs her body tightly. She looks superhuman in comparison to the other girls. Judging by the glares, they know it as well as I do.

"Drink," she says, shoving a cup into my hand.

Clear liquid spills out of the lid and drips onto the carpet. Months have passed since I've had alcohol, but I don't hesitate. It burns, sharp as fire, as it drips down my throat.

"Want to dance?" Gemma asks.

"No," I say, even though there's no point in arguing with her.

She pulls me into the middle of the cramped living room. A boy to her right shoots me a dirty look. Gemma scowls at him, her thin nose and sharp jawline further defined in the purple light.

"Ignore him," she whispers. She lifts my hand into the air and twirls me like she did the first night we met. When I saw Gemma Shao at our homecoming dance freshman year, I was speechless. It took me hours to work up the courage to ask

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her to dance. Our horrible attempt at a line dance sparked a friendship that's lasted us through to today: the third week of our senior year of high school.

"Is there any more to drink?" I ask.

Gemma snatches two more cups. This time, the alcohol goes down easily. I hold the empty cup into the air like a trophy and Gemma laughs.

Suddenly, the music stops. The room is silent except for one, booming voice.

"Whichever idiot parked in my driveway; you have forty-five seconds to move it before I sit my drunk ass in your driver's seat and do it myself!"

Elliott King, the host of the party, towers over the stereo system. His black tank top shows off several tattoos scattered across his arms and shoulders. I remember entertaining the idea that he might be illiterate after peer-reviewing his essay on *Pride and Prejudice*.

"Now!" he demands.

A short haired girl jolts to the door. Elliott grabs the solo cup out of her hands as she leaves, downs the beer in one gulp, then screams, "Let's fucking go!"

The music starts up louder than before. Elliott reaches for the closest girl he can find, pulling her in for a public make-out session that threatens to resurface my drink. Gemma and I take shots of what I think is vodka, then dance and sing until my throat is sandpaper.

"Water," I mutter, forgetting the other parts of the sentence.

Cups litter the carpet around us. I stopped counting after four. Gemma, noticing my lack of coordination, smiles. This isn't something she sees often.

"I'm on it. Stay here."

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As soon as her hands leave my shoulders, I lose my balance. I grip the granite countertop of the large kitchen island to keep myself upright. Gemma makes her way toward the fridge but doesn't get more than a few feet before a group of guys stop her to chat.

My spit barely makes it down. I'll get it myself.

When I let go of the counter, the room spins. Red, blue, and green lights mix into a messy rainbow so bright it burns. I manage to make it to the corner of the living room before the nausea hits. My hand slaps over my mouth.

I tap on the shoulder of the first person that walks by: a tall, muscular boy in a football jersey. His shaggy brown hair barely reaches past his shoulders. Only one word escapes my lips.

"Bathroom?"

To my relief, he smiles warmly.

"Sure. Follow me."

He snakes through the crowd. There's a number printed on the back of his jersey: eighteen. My lucky number. He guides me out of the living room, across the foyer, then toward the main staircase. I take a deep breath of air less tainted by smoke.

"You're Rose Berman, right? We had Math together last year."

My stomach sinks to the floor.

Of course. Harris Price. Star quarterback of the football team. The only varsity athlete in advanced calculus. I swallow down the sick taste that accompanies the memory of what happened in that classroom.

"Yes," I whisper.

If Harris notices my discomfort, he doesn't react. He grins as he leads me upstairs. One of my hands grips the railing,

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the other instinctively falls onto his back to steady myself. His shoulders tense, but he doesn't stop moving.

"This way."

We creep down the long, towering hallway of Elliott King's mansion of a house. He hosts parties here almost every weekend. The walls are bare of any family pictures, and most of the expensive furniture is destroyed. I wonder where his dad is tonight.

To the left, an open door reveals a group of freshmen passing around a joint. One of them waves. Harris, uninterested, continues down the hallway. He stops at the last door on the right and ushers me in with his hand.

"Thank you," I utter, relieved.

A queen-sized bed and a night table face me.

It's a bedroom, not a bathroom.

I turn around. "I really need—"

Harris shoves me forward. I stumble into the side of the bed, piercing pain shooting through my knees. Amused laughter erupts from the corner. I look up to find a huddle of seniors watching us. A blonde girl giggles at the shock on my face as she leans her head onto Elliott King's shoulder. He's eyeing a thin line of white powder on the table in front of them.

"You brought Berman?" barks the blonde.

She takes a hit off a joint, then passes it to Elliott. He winks at her before pulling in a cloud of smoke. The fog fills up the small space and I cough.

"I thought she might be fun," Harris replies. He takes a step toward me. I take a step away from him. My ankles hit the bed frame and I fall backwards onto the mattress; the sudden movement makes the liquid in my stomach rise to my throat.

"I need to go," I moan, sitting up.

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Harris acts like he doesn't hear me. Or maybe I'm not speaking loud enough. I say it again, with conviction this time. He rubs his rough hands over his brown hair and flashes a sly smile. From my position on the bed, his height is amplified.

"You haven't been at school in a while," he says.

I wince. I thought that after two months of summer break, gossip about what had happened in calculus would have finally died down.

"Well," I say, "I'm back."

A flash of heat raises my body temperature, and the blonde girl notices. She twists her face as she stares at the sweat pooling around my bangs.

"Do you think she's possessed?" she jokes.

"Maybe she needs some pot?" Elliott suggests innocently.

Much to the girl's annoyance, he offers up the joint to me. Instead of taking it, I bend over and puke onto the checkered brown and white rug. Which probably costs more than anything in my house.

Shit.

I freeze. The smell of what I've done wafts upwards, threatening to make me puke again.

"Well, fuck," says Elliott "You couldn't have aimed for the trash?"

Harris chuckles. The rest of the group joins in, creating a chorus of laughter at my expense. The quarterback, undeterred by my sickness, creeps closer. He takes a seat on the bed beside me and places his hand on my shoulder. His skin is ice cold. I lift my eyes to meet his. Nothing. They're clear as glass, void of any emotion.

"You know, I think the psycho thing is kind of hot," Harris comments as if noticing me for the first time.

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The corners of his lips curl like a butcher ogling a slab of meat.
“Isn’t that what everyone calls you? Psycho?”

“Don’t bother. She’s a prude,” the blonde girl retorts.

Maddy Davis. She moved here only a few months ago from Virginia. Elliott whispers something in her ear that makes her giggle.

Harris’s hand moves from my shoulder down my left arm like he’s marking my skin. I open my mouth to defend myself, but my words disappear when his fingertips touch my neck. He gently grabs a piece of my dark brown hair and twists it.

I stop breathing.

“You’re not a prude,” says Harris, unashamedly exploring my curves.

I feel naked in this tight black dress. I shouldn’t have listened when Gemma suggested I wear it. Gemma. She’s one floor beneath me. I will her to save me from this humiliation, begging her to somehow hear my thoughts . . .

She doesn’t.

I want to scream. I *should* scream. But my throat is raw, incapable of making any sound except for a whimper.

“Are you?” Harris asks.

The walls of Elliott’s bedroom are covered in posters, and I focus on one hanging to the left of the bed—a jazz musician playing a guitar. I count the strings on it.

One.

Harris places his hand softly around my neck.

“Stop,” I finally manage, my voice uncooperating.

Two.

Harris’s hand travels down to the top of my chest where he traces my collarbone with his index finger. His hands are calloused and prickly.

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“Stop,” I say louder.

Harris shakes his head. Instinctively, I try pushing him away, but as my palms meet his shoulders, he knocks me flat on my back.

This time I know I’m shouting.

“Stop!”

Three.

It all happens so quickly. A pair of inked hands grabs the back of Harris’s jersey and pulls him off of me. I sit up when Elliott slams him into the table, shattering the glass.

Maddy dives away from the commotion. “What the hell, Elliott?” she exclaims.

Tiny pieces of glass litter the floor around the two boys. Blood pools from a fresh cut in Harris’s arm and drips onto the puke-stained rug. He pulls himself back onto his feet, his anger rising.

“Never thought you’d play the hero, King,” he spits.

A hint of amusement flashes across Elliott’s face. He doesn’t seem afraid. In fact, he relaxes. Like this is his usual Saturday night. He crosses his arms and lets out an annoyed groan.

“Get out,” he commands.

It’s a stark contrast to the comical tone I’m used to when he cracks a dirty joke in class. Harris kicks over a piece of the broken table, spilling more glass shards onto the rug. White powder sticks to the saturated fabric.

Elliott takes another step toward Harris. Elliott might be an inch shorter, but his arms are twice the size, and so is his presence. He lifts his chin, daring the quarterback to make a move, but to my surprise, Harris doesn’t.

“Fine,” Harris concedes, “but don’t expect any more favors from me.”

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He turns to me, and I scoot backward on the bed.

“Tell anyone about this and you’re dead. Got it, Psycho?”

I nod once, then Harris storms out of the room. Maddy rises from her spot on the ground. She hops over the mess on the floor like she’s puddle jumping, then pauses in the doorway.

“Come on, Elliott.”

His feet stay planted. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Maddy huffs before disappearing into the hall. Only after she leaves do I notice my hands are shaking. Elliott comes to the side of the bed and crouches down to my level. The power that radiated from him only moments ago is gone. He’s calm, his blue irises dripping with concern.

“Do you want me to take you home?”

I can’t tell if he’s being sincere. His pupils are dilated, the whites around them bloodshot. I glance between him and the white powder stuck to the rug. I’ve heard rumors about Elliott’s drug use but seeing it close up is more disturbing than entertaining.

“Rose?”

He sounds like he’s talking to a child. I lift my chin, desperate to prove I’m not a kicked puppy.

“No, I’m fine.”

I stand up from the bed, ready to get the hell out of here, but my body moves in slow motion. I should thank him for helping me, but my brain is screaming, and my throat hasn’t recovered.

I hold on to the walls as I creep out of the disaster of a bedroom without another word from either of us.

Somewhere in the crowd is Harris, chatting girls up like he does at pep rallies. I don’t look up from the floor of Elliott’s house until I’m safely outside.

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The wind blows my thin dress. Atlanta usually isn't this cold in September. I rub my hands against my arms to keep the goosebumps away. A few classmates from the party follow behind me, engaged in their own loud conversation. Is the story already making rounds? I stop to listen.

"You guys want to go back to my place?"

"Totally."

For the first time since entering Elliott's bedroom, I exhale. His house is only steps away from my own. We've been next door neighbors ever since the third grade when his family refurbished the abandoned mansion.

Climbing the stairs to my front door, someone grabs my shoulder.

Cold hands. Sharp nails.

Harris followed me!

He squeezes, and my blood stops flowing. I gasp from the pain, throwing my palm over my mouth to silence my scream. My heart pounds against my rib cage. When I work up the courage to face him, my hand curls into a fist in the same way Elliott's did.

Nobody is behind me.

The street is empty. I shove my key into the door. Quickly step into the foyer and turn the bolt. The sound of my father snoring from the recliner settles my nerves. I take a deep breath, tiptoe around him, careful not to make any noise. The clock on the coffee table reads a quarter to midnight.

I was only gone for an hour. It felt like an eternity.

The stairs creak, but my father's snoring doesn't falter when I reach my bedroom. Next to the stack of unfinished homework on my desk, my phone vibrates. I should have brought the damn thing with me.

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Gemma: I got your water. Where r u?

Gemma: Helloo?

Gemma: Did you leave?

Crap.

Rose: Hey, sorry. Got sick and went home.

Three dots appear on the screen as she types. Everyone must know what happened by now. Gemma won't even get to hear it from me.

Gemma: Feel better. Nishi kissed me!

The adrenaline cascading throughout my body finally slows its course.

News hasn't spread. Not yet, at least.

A sour smell wafts from the bottom of my dress to my nose. I saunter into the bathroom, pausing when I reach the mirror.

I look like absolute shit.

My curls are bunched together in dark, matted knots. The choppy bangs across my forehead are soaked with sweat. Red blotches clot the pale skin on my neck. I trace the outline of one with my pointer finger.

I put the shower on the hottest temperature. The water is probably burning my skin, but I can't feel it. I can't feel anything except Harris's fingers tracing my arm. I scrub every spot he touched until it's raw. Even then, no matter how hard I scrub, the outline of his dirty fingers won't fade.

Behind me, Maddy laughs. Harris smirks viciously. Elliott lunges. The violent symphony of the glass shattering replays

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again and again and again. How did I not notice that Harris's eyes had no color in them when I spotted him? Why did I assume he was safe to follow?

Salty tears drip onto my lips. I sink down to the floor of the tub, tucking my head between my knees. I've been warned a thousand times by my friends, my father, even my mother before her death, that something like this could happen. It could happen to anyone.

Anyone, I thought, except for me.

I stay seated on the shower floor until the water runs cold.



CHAPTER TWO

SUNLIGHT STREAMS THROUGH MY WINDOWS, WAKING ME UP EARLY. Too early. I groan, throwing a pillow over my face to block the golden light. The innermost part of my skull pulses as if it has a heartbeat, and my stomach rumbles from the alcohol lingering in my system. I slept for no more than an hour or two.

My phone vibrates from my nightstand. If news about what happened in Elliott's bedroom was going to make rounds at the party, it would have by now. I whisper a silent prayer in Hebrew before opening the text.

Gemma: Got home safe.

The stiffness in my shoulders ease. If nobody else finds out about last night, I might be able to forget it ever happened. I can lock up the memory and bury it.

Tossing my phone back onto the nightstand, I drag myself out of bed. Last night's black dress taunts me from the floor. Scowling, I kick it beneath my desk, out of my line of sight. Maybe Gemma will help me burn it later.

My reflection in the mirror is slightly less monstrous, but my eyes are still hooded with tiredness. I rub a layer of concealer across my skin to cover up the red spots. Even after brushing my teeth for five whole minutes, I still taste vodka on my tongue.

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I'm *never* drinking again.

The smell of bacon grease wafts from downstairs and my stomach growls. I can't remember the last time I had anything to eat. After one last peek at the mirror, I follow the smell to the kitchen.

My father's disheveled dark hair is sticking out in multiple directions. I hold back a giggle as he tries and fails to flip a pancake. He's been cooking breakfast every Sunday morning since my mom died. It's one of our few remaining traditions.

"How was the movie?" he asks.

Right. I lied about my plans. He wouldn't have cared much if I went to a party; in fact, he probably would have been excited about me hanging out with other people again, but the movie excuse seemed better than suffering through his "don't drink or you'll die" speech for the tenth time.

"Pretty good."

He passes me a plate stacked with pancakes and pork bacon. Before my mother died, we used to keep kosher. Now we don't even go to synagogue.

"Sleep okay?"

I lift my chin and smile with as much energy as I can muster. "Yeah. I had weird dreams."

I've been using "weird" instead of "bad" recently.

"Do you want a ride to your appointment?"

I've told him a thousand times I'm getting better, but he insists I keep seeing Dr. Taylor, my therapist, an aging man with too much patience for his own good. Although, after last night, complaining to somebody doesn't sound like as much of the usual inconvenience. I shove a forkful of food into my mouth.

"Sure, thanks."

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We slip into small talk about our plans for the upcoming week. I toss my cleared plate into the sink, then head upstairs to change. My room is a disaster. I throw the purple comforter over my sheets and straighten up the rest of the bed. One of the posters on the wall, the album cover of Nirvana's *In Utero*, threatens to fall onto my head. I grab an extra tack from my desk and pin up the bottom.

"Ready?" calls my dad from downstairs.

I glare at the black dress on the floor once more before leaving.

My dad hums along to the radio as he drives. Apart from a few solo cups peeking out of the bushes, there is no sign at all there was ever a party at Elliott's.

Grady Hospital is less than a ten-minute drive from our house. A security guard waves the car into the covered parking lot. Dad picks the closest spot to the entrance.

"Do you want me to come in with you?"

I shake my head. He always asks even though I never let him. I attempt a reassuring smile, but the concern on his face doesn't fade. These appointments end differently each time. Sometimes I leave feeling better; other times not so much.

Rain sprinkles onto my hoodie. I take my time walking to the front entrance, sucking in a lungful of cool autumn air.

Inside, the smell of sterilization is overwhelming. The walls are coated in a thick layer of white paint. I asked Dr. Taylor once about the choice of color. He told me that white raises the moods of patients, but I disagree. Too bright.

"How have you been?" Dr. Taylor asks.

A pair of thick-rimmed glasses sit dangerously close to the edge of his nose. One tiny movement and they'll fall right off.

"Good," I reply half-heartedly.

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He motions for me to take a seat, which I do. Compared to the white of the hallways, the brown hardwoods in his office are comforting. I run my hands over the three marks dug into the hand rest of the chair. Months ago, during a boring session, I determined someone must have forced their nails into it.

“Is the Prozac still working?”

I respond truthfully, “I haven’t had a panic attack since I started it.”

I never thought something as small as a pill could help so much. I take one every morning like clockwork, never missing a dosage. Dr. Taylor scribbles in the notebook in his lap. His gray, speckled hair bounces around as he writes.

“You mentioned last week that Gemma invited you to a party? How did that go?”

Some of his features are similar to Harris’s. Their lips are identical in size and shape, and they prefer the same musty cologne.

“It was alright.”

I try not to react to the weight of his question but hiding even the slightest negative reaction from him is an Olympic feat. I swear he was born for this gig—body language is his natural dialect.

“You seem on edge. What happened?”

I speak through gritted teeth. “Some people made fun of me while I was there.”

“What did they say?”

“A lot of stuff. One of them was in class with me. When it happened.”

I remember Harris’s reaction, now. He was sitting in the front row of the classroom when the EMTs guided me out of calculus. That day disrupted the rest of my junior year; Dr.

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Taylor and I have spent the last few months working toward some form of normality again.

“Did this person say something about the incident?”

“No. But he called me *Psycho*.”

Dr. Taylor groans. He’s become as annoyed with the nickname as I am. He really does care, which makes admitting the bad stuff even worse. I sink into the chair.

“High schoolers are incredibly immature. We both know that.”

“I know,” I mumble.

Dr. Taylor’s guided me through a thousand different exercises where I learn to ignore the *Psycho* thing, but I haven’t found the courage to tell him it’s an impossible task. High school is literally all about being defined by the nicknames given to you by people like Harris Price.

Suddenly, Dr. Taylor’s green eyes light up. He pushes his glasses farther up on his nose and flashes a smile that makes me nervous.

“I have an idea, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

Not the most intriguing start.

“What if you tried out a sport?”

I can’t stop myself from laughing. Loudly.

Dr. Taylor rushes his words. “I think the physicality of it might help you forget about all the stuff going on mentally. It would give you something consistent to look forward to.”

Just entertaining the idea of myself playing a sport is nightmarish. I’m uncoordinated and the opposite of a team player. I’ve been picked last for kickball every year since sixth grade when I accidentally hit Angela Thomas in the face.

“I’m not joining a sports team,” I proclaim. To my surprise, Dr. Taylor doesn’t back down.

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“How about something more individualized? Yoga?”

“Too slow.”

“Track?”

“I hate running.”

“What about boxing?”

I pause.

Elliott wrangled Harris off of me without effort. He could have easily beat the school’s quarterback to a pulp if he wanted to. Elliott exuded the power I’ve been trying to get back ever since that day in calculus.

“Maybe,” I say.

Dr. Taylor beams. “There’s a place close by that my friend goes to, Midtown Ring. First lesson is free.”

He rips off a piece of paper, scribbles down the name of the gym, then passes it to me. I slip it into the pocket of my blue jeans. We spend the rest of the meeting discussing my plan for graduating on time.

“Same time next week?”

I nod, and he narrows his gaze on my pocket. “I truly hope you give it a go.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Exiting the hospital, I take out my phone and type Midtown Ring into Google. The gym’s website hasn’t been updated since 2005. Apart from a calendar with an address and a time for a class tomorrow, there’s no other information.

“Lovely,” I whisper.

The sprinkle of rain earlier has turned into a thunderstorm. I sprint to the car.

“How was it?” Dad asks.

“Dr. Taylor suggested I try boxing.”

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He stares at me like I've grown an extra head. "But . . . you hate sports?"

"I know," I sigh.

Dad seems to go through the same thought process I did—minus the visual of Elliott King throwing Harris Price into a glass table.

"Well," he finally says, "I guess there's no harm in trying."

He sounds hopeful. He's been desperately searching for something—anything—that might help me. A few boxing lessons aren't going to magically get rid of my anxiety, but I keep my mouth shut.

I spend the rest of the day catching up on my reading for class, the piece of paper heavy in my pocket.

*

Gemma wraps me in a hug when I step out the front door. Her hair, naturally black but dyed red, is pinned up into two Princess Leia buns.

"I have so much to tell you!" she exclaims.

"Why do you have this energy at eight in the morning?"

"Coffee, obviously."

I turn my nose. Caffeine makes my anxiety act up, so I've been staying away from our local Starbucks as much as a seventeen-year-old girl can. We start toward our school, Dekalb High. Other seniors pass us by on the other side of the street.

I need to tell her about Harris, but the words are glued to my throat. If Gemma finds out, she'll freak. She'll want to talk to Harris, and if the whole school is around to hear her, I may as well be dead.

Later. I'll tell her later.

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“We played spin the bottle after you left the party. Nishi spun and it landed on me. She wouldn’t kiss me though, which was super embarrassing.”

Gemma talks so quickly; I have to slow down my walk to understand her.

“Then she took me to this quiet corner in the back of the house and was like, ‘I didn’t want our first kiss to be in front of everyone else.’ And then she kissed me!”

I grin. For months, Gemma’s been pining after Nishi Kapoor, lacrosse player and president of the Gay-Straight Alliance club. For someone so outspoken, Nishi can’t form a coherent sentence in front of Gemma. I don’t blame her. Gemma’s intimidating. She’s never found it difficult to turn a crush into something more. The only time it didn’t work out for her was when I was her conquest.

“Was it good?”

“More than good.” Gemma drools. “I think I’m in love.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head, but I’m thrilled for her. “You say that at least once a month.”

“It’s true this time!”

As we approach the school gates, I practice Dr. Taylor’s exercise: Breathe in. Hold your breath. Count for three seconds. Release. Repeat. As always, it doesn’t help my anxiety. The only thing that does is the Prozac, which I forgot to take this morning.

Shit.

“Rose?” Gemma questions, “You good?”

“Sorry, yeah.”

The brick building is buzzing with students. Sophomores chat with each other, embracing their last moments of free-

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dom before the first bell rings. I scan the crowd for Harris, but he's nowhere to be found.

Hopefully, he caught the flu. Or something worse.

Gemma waves goodbye as we head to our respective classrooms. Math is emptier than usual. I have class in the same room that I took calculus in last year. Harris used to sit two rows in front of me. I spent hours staring at the words printed on the back of his jersey: *H. Price, Eighteen*.

"Rose?"

Mrs. Smith. She's waiting on an answer.

"What?"

Two girls in the back chuckle. I crane my neck and glare. It shuts them up.

"Can you solve the equation for us?"

"No. Sorry."

She lets me off easy. They usually do. I try to pay attention throughout the rest of the class, but I can't stop thinking about Harris. If he's not at school today, he'll certainly be back tomorrow. It's impossible to hide from him.

When the bell rings, I shiver.

I've been dreading this.

English class with Elliott King.

His back is facing me when I take my first step into the classroom. Girls crowd around his desk like moths to a flame. They laugh in perfect unison over the sight of him attempting to balance a pencil on the bridge of his nose.

He doesn't notice when I enter the room. No one ever does. I doubt he even knows we're in the same class. The desks to the left and right of me are empty, so I utilize the extra space for my notebooks. A girl to Elliott's right runs her hands across the collar of his green polo.

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“Cute shirt,” she purrs.

Maddy Davis. The girl from Elliott’s bedroom. She moves her hand down the side of Elliott’s chest and intertwines their fingers. His eyes wander absently toward a different girl across the room, narrowing on the shape of her butt.

Classy.

Mr. Ruse stands up right as the clock hits eleven. He’s the oldest, quirkiest teacher I have and his taste in fashion shows it. Today, he’s dressed in a bright purple suit with a polka-dotted tie. He scribbles the first few lines of *Annabel Lee* onto the white board.

“The last complete poem written by Edgar Allan Poe,” Ruse says, tapping a marker against the words. “One of my absolute favorites. Has anybody read it before?”

A few hands shoot up, including my own.

“Well, you all will be happy to know that we’re beginning our poetry unit today. I want each of you to choose a poem that you admire and discuss it in a paragraph or two. Write about what you think it means or how it makes you feel. Turn it in before Friday.”

I scribble down the assignment. Ruse dives into a lesson on Edgar Allan Poe, but my attention drifts to the bruise on the back of Elliott’s neck.

Did Harris get a hit in?

I swallow the bitter taste of guilt on my tongue. If only I had stayed in the kitchen and waited for Gemma to come back. Elliott’s room wouldn’t be destroyed. His skin wouldn’t be turning purple. And I wouldn’t want to die when he glances in my direction.

As class comes to an end, I can’t stop thinking about why I couldn’t sleep last night. I was too busy debating if I should

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take up Dr. Taylor's suggestion, and I still haven't come up with an answer.

I wait for Elliott and Maddy to clear the classroom before leaving my desk. Elliott wraps his arm around her shoulders and pulls her close, laughing obnoxiously about someone who fainted at his party. A freshman half Elliott's size crosses his path.

"Move," Elliott commands.

The kid jumps like a scared cat, earning an amused chuckle from Elliott. He's the king of the school when Harris isn't around.

Harris. His hungry expression as he stared down at me won't escape my mind. The rough touch of his fingers on my skin hasn't faded, and I'm not sure if it ever will. If I knew how to defend myself, things might have gone differently.

I know what I need to do.



CHAPTER THREE

FROM THE OUTSIDE, MIDTOWN RING IS A TOTAL SHITHOLE. Some of the letters on the sign have fallen off, so it reads “MIDTN RNG.” The only real sign of civilization comes from the chattering of people at the coffee shop next door.

After two minutes of awkwardly standing in the empty parking lot, a red car pulls into a spot near the gym’s entrance. A twenty something man with brown skin and teased, bushy coils steps out from the driver’s seat. He’s dressed in athletic shorts and a tank top that shows off his toned arms. A pair of light green gloves peek out of his backpack. He definitely belongs in a boxing gym. I glance at my own outfit. My converse, jeans, and an oversized hoodie don’t exactly scream pro-athlete. I don’t even have gloves.

I wait until after the man enters the building before making my way toward it. There are no windows, nothing at all to hint at what might be going on inside. I pause in front of the entrance. Take a deep breath. Shake out my hands. Every rational part of me screams, “*turn around and leave!*”

But then I think of my father. The hopeful smile on his face when I brought up Dr. Taylor’s idea was exactly what he’s been waiting for. He would want me to do this.

I want to do this.

I open the door.

IN THE RING

The inside of the gym is nicer than the outside. A graffiti mural of two purple boxing gloves covers the exposed brick wall in the back. Weight training equipment is scattered around the perimeter of a boxing ring. The ring itself is massive; the building reeks of sweat and people stronger than me. Punching bags hang from three of Midtown's walls. An enormous weight set takes up the fourth wall. To my left, the man from the parking lot waves.

"Are you here for the class tonight?" he asks.

I survey the rest of the room. A few other lurkers with muscles protruding from their tight clothing watch us. The only other woman here is at least three times my size.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

"Uh, this is the beginner's class, right?"

He chuckles. "Our adult classes are a mix of all skill levels. What's your name?"

"Rose."

He holds out his hand to shake. I do. His grip leaves a mark.

"I'm Andre." He peeks behind my shoulder at my backpack.

"Do you go to school nearby?"

"Yeah, I'm a senior at Dekalb."

"Oh! We have a kid in our group from that school. Maybe you know him. He's—"

We both turn around at the sound of the gym door opening. Elliott King, holding a pair of black boxing gloves in his tattooed right hand, strolls inside.

"Right there," Andre finishes.

Kill me.

Andre waves over the one person I've been trying to avoid all day. He has changed out of his school clothes and into gray sweats and a black tank, but it's without a doubt Elliott King. He approaches the two of us with a surprised expression. I

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calculate the best way to make a quick escape. *There's a back door in the corner behind the mural . . .*

"Have you two met?" asks Andre.

"Yep," Elliott answers casually.

"Cool. Show her how to wrap?"

He gives Elliott no time to respond before leaving the two of us alone. I open my mouth to try and offer up an explanation as to why I'm here, but Elliott turns and walks off before I'm able to get a word out.

"Come on," he says, motioning toward one of the benches.

He takes a seat beside me, and as he does, I get a whiff of his tank top. Cigarettes. The cheap ones my father used to smoke. Elliott opens his backpack and passes me two long, red strips of cloth.

"I used to do this wrong all the time. Fucked up my knuckles. So, pay attention."

He opens his right hand, exposing a tattoo on his middle finger of the King of Hearts playing card. He slides his thumb through the small loop on the piece of cloth. I do the same. Then, he twists the cloth around his palms.

"Shit," I grumble as my wrap comes undone.

He grabs the cloth and pulls my hand toward him as he ties it around my wrist. His skin is rough and battered, but his touch is gentle.

"You'll get better," he reassures me. Nicotine lingers on his breath.

"Thanks."

Elliott shoves his backpack into one of the lockers that line the area around the gym. I throw my own bag onto the floor, then grab a pair of brown communal boxing gloves from

IN THE RING

the crate by the locker room. They reek of death. I strap them on tight, but they're still too big.

The group of boxers gather in a semicircle in front of the ring. I stand on the right side of Elliott.

Do you remember what happened? Are you pissed I'm here?

I force myself to turn my attention to other members of the pack. There are six of us in total: Andre, two men—one of which has a stiff, long mustache and shoulder-length locs—a muscular tan-skinned woman, and of course, me and Elliott. We're certainly an eclectic group, but I didn't expect much else from the gym recommended to me by my therapist.

"Everyone, meet Rose," Andre announces.

My cheeks flush as the remainder of the group notices me. The strong woman scans my body and shakes her head.

"Oh, genial. Una niña débil."

She calls me a weakling. She's right. But I don't let on that I understand her. After four years of Spanish class, something was bound to stick.

"Calláte, Sofía!" Andre shouts, nudging her. He faces me. "Sorry. She's not the biggest fan of newcomers."

"I can speak for myself," Sofia interrupts. She looks me up and down again, pursing her lips. "You know, you need muscle for this sport."

My mouth turns dry. Andre talks over her, "You'll get stronger."

Sofía raises her hands in a mock surrender. Mustache guy, noticing my discomfort, flashes a friendly smile. His dark brown skin contrasts with the white of his tank top, making his muscles appear even more defined. He's tall. Stubble lines

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his cheeks and there are subtle scars across his body. He's definitely been doing this for a long time.

I really don't belong here.

"Rose, why did you decide to try out boxing?" asks Andre.

Well, I was assaulted by my classmate at a party, so I want to learn how to punch someone in the face in case it happens again. Also, my therapist, who I see because I'm probably losing my mind, suggested I come here.

"I need more exercise," I grumble.

"Fair enough."

Andre leads the group in a few stretches. My calves burn from even the slightest movement, but I follow along with the rest of the boxers, not wanting to paint myself as an outcast more than I have. Elliott stands to my right. Our shoulders are only inches away from touching, and I silently hope that my deodorant holds up until the end of practice.

"Line up!" Andre exclaims, herding us toward a heavy bag. I go to the back of the line.

"Give me eight jabs. Rose, just watch for now."

I step aside. Mustache guy goes first. He places his left foot steadily in front of him, bends his elbows and points his chin down. He punches with his left hand, glove bouncing off the bag with a loud snap. It shakes from the force of each hit.

"That's Riley," Andre whispers to me. "He's a doctor at Emory. He's been coming here for years."

A boy closer to my age takes his turn.

"Max is also new."

Max punches with less power than Riley, but his hits are impressive. Next up is Sofia. She uses the perfect combi-

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nation of strength and precision in her punches. The sharp noise from the impact echoes throughout the gym.

Andre, noticing the shock on my face, muffles a laugh. “Sofía’s practically a professional. Don’t be intimidated.”

Easier said than done.

As Sofía steps away from the bag, she finally smiles at me. It’s not comforting.

“And of course, you know Elliott.”

He positions himself the same way as the rest of the boxers, but the punches he throws are quieter. They don’t shake the room in the same way as Sofía’s, but they’re thrown with so much power that the whole gym submits into perfect silence.

Elliott is usually obnoxious and noisy to a fault. His punches should be the loudest ones here. I don’t have a second to ponder the weirdness of it all before Andre declares that it’s my turn to try. I open my mouth to object, but Sofía nudges me forward with her shoulder.

“You got this,” Andre says.

I do my best to copy the same stance as Riley: left leg in front, fists curled. Andre touches the bottom of my elbows and moves them upwards toward my chin.

“You want to protect your face,” he instructs. “Keep your elbows tight. Aim like you’re going for the nose.”

What’s the point in tightening muscles that barely exist? Just as I’m about to make a beeline for the exit, I think of my father. He would want me to try, even if I might fail. Otherwise, I came here for nothing.

I throw my first jab.

Strength travels from the tips of my toes to my clenched fists. The weighted bag swings slightly when my skin comes into contact with the thick material.

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It moved.

It did what I wanted.

The rush of adrenaline and power is sudden and overwhelming, and I find myself relaxing, *really* relaxing, for the first time in months. Andre breaks into a slow round of applause, followed by the rest of the group.

“I knew you could do it,” he says. “You’ll only get better from here.”

His prideful smile inspires me to keep going. I hit the bag a couple more times to complete the warm-up. Each time, my confidence improves. I feel strong, which is a word I’ve never used to describe my frail arms.

When I turn back toward the group, Elliott winks.

“You could cause some real damage with a punch like that.”

I bow, quietly laughing as I do. Maybe this doesn’t have to be weird.

The rest of the lesson passes by in a blur. I watch as the rest of the group does more challenging routines. Andre makes me try out a right hook and an uppercut. I stumble, but Andre brushes it off, claiming again I’ll improve with practice.

We end the lesson by watching Sofia and Riley spar. They each have their own strategy that balances the other out. Riley surrenders when Sofia knocks him to the floor, and they both collapse.

“Wow,” I whisper.

Elliott takes the place at my side. I pass him the hand wraps.

“Thanks for letting me borrow those.”

A bead of sweat drips from his buzzed blonde hair onto his forehead as he tosses the wraps into his bag.

“No problem.”

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From behind, Andre grabs my right shoulder. The sudden, familiar pressure of the touch makes me shudder. The panic passes in an instant, but not before Elliott notices. He frowns.

So, he does remember.

“Will you be back Wednesday?” Andre asks.

“I think so.”

He grins. “Sweet. Rest your muscles!”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I feel like a worn-out rag doll.

Outside, the wind cools the layer of heat across my body. I make my way through the parking lot, glancing behind me as Elliott climbs into his black convertible. He holds a cigarette in his left hand and uses his right to turn the key in the ignition. I could pick out the sound of his car in a concert of engines. That damn convertible speeds past my bedroom window every morning, music blasting so loud it serves as my alarm.

When I get home, Dad’s recliner is empty. He’s been taking on extra shifts at work ever since Mom died. I’ve asked a hundred times to let me help with the bills, but he refuses, insisting school should be my only concern. An untouched box of pizza is waiting on the counter. I shove two pieces of pepperoni into my mouth before heading upstairs to shower.

The hot water soothes my aching muscles. I coat my body in a thick layer of lavender soap to wash away the grime and sweat. Harris’s fingerprints across my body fade with the waves of rushing water.

For the first time since Elliott’s party, I’m clean.

*

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“How was it?”

My father perks up when I walk into the kitchen. He takes a sip of morning coffee from a “World’s Best Dad” mug I bought when I was ten. I grab a bottle of Advil from the cabinet and down two. The muscles in my arms haven’t stopped hurting since I left the gym yesterday. Collapsing into the chair next to his, I notice the dark circles around his eyes.

“Didn’t you work last night? You should sleep—”

“I want to hear about boxing.”

I’m glad to relay some good news to him.

“It was great! I tried some punches, and my teacher is cool. The class meets twice a week, so I’ll go again on Wednesday.”

He pauses mid-sip. “Sorry, did I hear that correctly? My daughter is going to exercise twice in one week?”

I stick out my tongue right as the doorbell rings. “I’ll tell you more after school. Get some sleep!”

He nods. I snatch my backpack from the floor of the kitchen and make my way out the front door. Gemma smiles. She’s wearing a blue dress with strawberries and blackberries embroidered into the neckline.

“I ran into Nishi after school,” she declares.

“Good morning to you too.”

She trips down the stairs, cursing in Mandarin under her breath. I grab a hold of her arm to steady her.

“Heels,” she spits. The extra inch of height from the shoes makes her tower above me. “We talked for like three hours,” she continues, not missing a beat, “I think it became a date, but I didn’t ask.”

She stops walking, opens her mouth, and frowns in horror.

“Should I have asked?”

“You’re asking *me* for relationship advice?”

IN THE RING

The two of us are polar opposites when it comes to relationships. Gemma dates around, while I've only ever dated her. When we met at homecoming, only weeks before my mother's death, I thought she was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. There was an undeniable attraction between us, but I was terrified of my own feelings. Gemma talked to me about her experiences with girls from her hometown like it was the most casual thing in the world.

"I'm so scared!" I admitted.

She giggled. "Rose, it's just a kiss. You don't have to be scared."

"But what if I mess up? What if it's weird?"

"Do you want me to kiss you?"

"What?" I asked, eyes widening.

"You know. To get it over with."

I froze, contemplating the idea of Gemma kissing me. She was gorgeous, and I thought she might like me, and I didn't want to screw it up. My heart was racing so fast I thought it might explode. All I could do was nod. Gemma grinned, then leaned in and pressed her lips to mine. It was the opposite of terrifying. It was wonderful.

Weeks later, we both got drunk at a friend's birthday party. I kissed her, and her lips tasted like honey and strawberry lip gloss.

"We should try this," Gemma said. "Being together. Right?"

Right? Didn't we owe it to ourselves after months of friendship? I agreed, but it went downhill quickly. Our conversations were suddenly awkward, like we needed to start our friendship over but on completely different terms. We decided after only five days of "dating" that we made

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better friends. Both of us were so relieved that the other felt the same that we agreed to never try anything like it again.

“Hello? Earth to Rose?”

Gemma’s voice snaps me out of the memory.

“Sorry.”

“What did you do after school?”

I tell her the truth, as crazy as it sounds. “I took a boxing class at the place downtown. Elliott King was there.”

Gemma gasps. “Boxing? Since when are you into that?”

“Since yesterday, I guess.”

The sharp sound of an engine revving stops me in my tracks. I recognize it immediately.

“Speak of the devil,” Gemma murmurs.

We watch as Elliott’s black BMW approaches the stop sign, rap music blasting through the open windows. He takes a drag of a cigarette. In the passenger seat, holding his free hand with hers, is Maddy Davis. Her blonde hair, curled to perfection, floats wildly in the wind. Elliott doesn’t check for pedestrians before speeding through the stop sign.

“Believe it or not, he was actually pretty nice.”

Gemma sneers. “I don’t believe it.”

We make plans to hang out later in the week before splitting up for class. I spend the morning doodling over my notes, rendering them useless. In English class, Mr. Ruse looks suspiciously like he’s dead. I’m relieved when he blinks. He breaks into an enthusiastic smile once the bell rings.

I’m the only one to smile back.

“I hope you all are working on your poetry assignment.”

Maddy leans over and whispers in Elliott’s ear. He smirks, muttering something back to her, but not quietly enough to get away with it. Mr. Ruse locks in on them.

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“Did you pick a poem, Luke?” he asks.

I vaguely remember seeing Elliott’s older brother, Luke, at school last year before he graduated. They could have been mistaken for twins if not for Elliott’s array of tattoos. Luke was even more of a ladies’ man than his brother.

“Sorry, wrong King,” Mr. Ruse grumbles. “Elliott?”

“Yeah,” he barks, “I read ‘Fire and Ice’ by Jack Frost.”

“Robert Frost.”

“Whatever.”

Elliott sinks farther into his chair. He taps his foot against the floor.

“Did you like it?”

“Sure,” he says, monotone. “If you like watching paint dry.”

Ruse’s eyebrows furrow. My gaze drifts to the bottom of Elliott’s desk. His hands, littered with healing scabs, grip the bottom of the wood.

Ruse presses on. “Well, which do you think it will be?”

Elliott plays off his agitation, but I can tell he’s uncomfortable. He must have the lowest GPA of the entire school. “What?”

“The end of the world. What will destroy it?”

“Fire,” Elliott replies, unflinching. “I think everything will burn.”

Ruse doesn’t ask him any more questions. Elliott’s grip on the desk loosens. He stays quiet for the rest of our class discussion, only occasionally making comments at inappropriate times. I do my best to concentrate on Ruse, but as always recently, my attention drifts to my phone.

GEMMA: Coffee after school?

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I'm so distracted by answering Gemma's text that I crash into someone on my way out of the classroom door. The impact of our bodies knocks the wind from my chest. I turn to apologize, but the words disappear when I realize who it is.

Colorless eyes stare into mine. I could never forget that cold stare.

"Careful," he hisses.

Harris Price, dressed in the same football jersey he was wearing at Elliott's party, examines me. I stand frozen in place for at least a full minute before I disintegrate.

I need to leave, but my feet won't budge.

Harris observes me with the utmost curiosity, like I'm a specimen to be studied. I can only put together one coherent thought: *I can't do this again. Not in front of the entire school.*

I scream at my body to listen to my brain, commanding my legs to work. The women's bathroom is around the corner. If I can make it there, Harris can't touch me.

Laughter erupts from the doorway to Ruse's classroom. Elliott walks out with a different girl than Maddy at his side. His laughter fades when he notices Harris.

Please, I beg my feet. Please move.

I've never been able to describe my anxiety to my dad. Every time I try, he doesn't understand the panic isn't entirely in my head. I wish he could see me now, with my hands shaking and my face ghostly white, so he might finally understand how physical this truly is.

An eternity later, my feet finally move again. I sprint away from Harris, Elliott, and the other students into the bathroom.

I count. It helped last time. Didn't it?

One.

IN THE RING

My own words play back to me, “I haven’t had a panic attack since I started it.”

Two.

How stupid was I to think that boxing might somehow fix this?

Three.

A few girls watch as I push my way into an empty stall. I heave into the toilet. There’s nothing in my stomach, but I still try to rid myself of the weight in my body. Tears drip down my cheeks, and my vision goes white. I crash onto the floor and throw my head between my knees, trying once again to practice Dr. Taylor’s damn breathing exercise that never works.

“Rose?”

The dizziness fades when I finally let go. My movements still as the world around me fades into darkness.