

Rose

"We are what we repeatedly do." — Aristotle

One—*inhale, exhale*. Two—*inhale, exhale*. Three.

The pattern was so familiar to me, it should've been sickening. For anyone else, it would be. But for me, it was normal. For me, it was just another time I was stuck waiting on my best friend who hardly ever showed his face.

The love of my life, I reminded myself.

The phone call cut to voicemail after the sixth ring, an automated voice of August's number—one that played on a loop in my head— sending my stomach to my feet more times than I wanted to think about. My mind raced to justify why he wasn't available this time. Why he couldn't answer the phone I knew he always kept in his pocket. I could almost picture him lifting the phone, seeing my name, then putting it back down.

But there was always a reason. A good one, too.

Stomach flu. Or maybe he never actually saw the call and had fallen asleep early on accident. Either one I'd be willing to forgive. Again.

"Next!"

Shit.

I fumbled with my finger against the phone before sliding to end the call, having left a blank voicemail that lasted close to a full minute. Great. Now I'd seem desperate *and* he'd have a recording of me breathing through the speaker.

"Next in line!"

Someone cleared their throat behind me while somewhere further down the line an older woman shouted something along the lines of needing to get inside before she pissed herself. I held my hand up as if trying to answer a question no one asked and stepped forward.

"Me. Hi. Yeah. I'm here." I started to dig through my purse for my wallet while my eyes glazed over the movie posters along the wall to my left.

"Which movie and time?"

"Huh?" I peeled my eyes from the wall, positive I had no idea what movie August would prefer if he ever showed.

The teenager behind the Plexiglas huffed, drawing his palm down the length of his face and snagging his chapped, bottom lip on the edge of his fingers. I grimaced as it snapped back up. "Movie. Time. There's a line." He threw his arm out, fingertips stopping right before the clear wall that thankfully separated us.

I wanted to glance behind me to see if August had finally made it, but another person shouted some obscenity I couldn't make out over the ringing in my right ear. No, make that both ears.

I tucked a few dark strands of straightened hair behind my ear before opening my wallet. "Um, right." My shoulders crumpled inward. "I'm kind of waiting for someone still, can I just—" I pointed beside me to where the ropes that formed the queue draped, then decidedly stepped out from my position in line before the impatient asshole could answer, stopping only when my hip bit into the dinghy rope.

“Next!” I wasn’t even out of the line yet and already the pimple-faced teen ushered in the next person from behind me.

“Two for whatever is playing in the next five minutes.” The new man’s voice was calm, stern, and completely void of adolescence. It was nothing like the kid’s behind the Plexiglas. Seconds later a whirring noise followed by clicks sent the image of dust spitting out from an old machine right at the teen boy through my mind. My lips turned up—like sweet payback for his rudeness, only he probably didn’t mind the dust soaking up the oil on his greasy face.

My eyes glazed over the movie posters along the old theater’s exterior wall again as the next person stepped forward, my back turned to the line to avoid meeting the eyes of all the people I’d angered by being so indecisive. Those people didn’t know or care that August was the decider. He decided where we went in our small town, when, and for how long, while I usually ended up paying for whatever he picked with what little money I earned, flashing my independence like that would finally make him see me. Make him want me like I wanted him.

Was it stupid to think I still had a chance at being more than just his best friend after nearly eight years of waiting? Probably. Did that make me give up? Not a chance.

A warm hand splayed on my shoulder, softening my inner turmoil. “About time. I was waiting for you,” I whispered and turned, clutching my bag to my chest. But as I did, the rope scraped against my ass, causing me to lose my footing until his warm hand returned and stabilized me. I smiled more at his touch, unable to see him clearly as a gust of wind fanned my dark hair over my eyes, plastering to my makeup. I tried to clear the hair from my face as effortlessly as possible but failed terribly, spitting the stubborn hair glued to my red lipstick.

“For me, huh?” The warmth left my shoulder and I froze as my mind registered a voice that wasn’t August’s.

No, it was undeniably the same one I’d heard minutes before in line.

The last few strands of hair left my eyes with a final puff of air, letting me fully take in the man standing right in front of me.

Not. August.

I exhaled my immediate disappointment. “No, sorry. I thought you were...umm...” I angled my head to the side, trying to block out the lightbulb that beamed along the wall behind him. Squared-back and broad shoulders shifted against a fitted black Henley t-shirt, covering the light as I straightened my head. I swallowed. “Did...did I drop something?” I asked, looking down at the mold-covered pavement beneath my sneakers, where my attention staggered back to him. I found myself fixating on the fit of his jeans, how the edges were tailored just right and draped perfectly over what looked like a very athletic body, just like his shirt did as I reached his chest. As if it wasn’t enough, I traced the lines of his tattoos along his corded arms—definitely built. And so damn *tall*. Taller than August by several inches, if not an entire half-foot.

His posture bordered on rigid as he cocked his head curiously back down at me. He looked amused. “No, you didn’t.” *That voice*. I scanned the floor briefly again anyway, realizing I hadn’t looked for anything I might’ve dropped the first time right as two tickets flipped up between his fingers, blocking the ground from view. Green eyes—dark, like a forest—greeted me as I looked up at him once more.

“Satisfied?” The corner of his mouth lifted into a smirk, catching that I had just thoroughly checked him out. Twice. I narrowed my eyes as he checked his watch, each link glinting more than the one before it. It looked expensive, and as casual as he may have been dressed, *he* looked expensive. “We have two minutes, though I don’t think it matters if we’re late,” he said.

“I’m waiting for someone,” I replied instantly. I made a show to check my phone again, though I could have guessed correctly there would be no missed calls, no texts. Nothing. I was waiting for someone who obviously had no intention of coming.

The man's dark brow lifted. "And how is that working out for you?"

Being stood up, I could handle. Being talked to like I couldn't tell what was happening hit a nerve. I folded my arms across my chest, then tucked them in tighter, suddenly more self-conscious of the low-cut dress I was wearing. I wanted it to draw August's attention, not some guy who decided to be an ass to a girl he didn't even know, though whether he was looking back at me like I'd done to him was hard to tell.

I pushed those thoughts away and slapped on a fake smile. "Great. It's great. He should be here in"—I checked my phone again, trying to hide the disappointment on my face—"A few. He should be here soon. Real soon." Why I was entertaining his questions in the first place, I didn't know.

The light behind him highlighted the angle of his jaw shifting, his scrutiny seeming to linger around my bare shoulders—not my chest. "It's getting cold out. I wouldn't want my girlfriend waiting for me in the dark, in the cold. All alone." He raked a hand through his blonde hair, pushing it back from where a few strands had fallen over his forehead. August had blonde hair too, but his was longer, more golden, and unruly. I'd always liked that about him—his whole grungy-type vibe. But the guy in front of me looked like he spent time on his appearance. He had lighter, almost platinum hair that was cropped closely on the sides yet longer along the top half where it was brushed over—way more orderly than I could imagine August's hair ever being.

"I'm not alone, I have—I'm just...I'm meeting someone." I intentionally avoided correcting the part where he referred to me as the waiting girlfriend. Because I liked the sound of that. And August wasn't here to correct that title, was he?

"You already said that." He held the tickets out closer to me, fanning them. "Look, we can sit in separate areas of the theater if you want. You can wait inside until the person you are waiting for shows. Maybe they like the"—his green eyes widened almost comically and brightened against the other small, flickering bulb above us—"Attack of the 50ft Woman? That can't be right."

I took one of the tickets, eyeing him unapologetically this time before I checked the movie title. “Oh, that’s right. They play it every year around Halloween.”

“Halloween ended weeks ago,” he said flatly.

“Sure did.” I eyed the ticket again, then checked my phone once more. Nothing. I looked around the man’s shoulders. “Did you buy this ticket for me or were you meeting someone, too?”

One of his hands moved to his pocket. “I’m not meeting anyone.”

“So, this is for me?”

He mimicked my motions from before, looking over his shoulder. “I was going to offer it to that other woman in line, but I think she already ran inside to pee.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Thank you then, I guess? I can pay you back.” I moved to start digging through my purse for my wallet.

“That’s not necessary.” His voice came out with a tinge of irritation, like I’d insulted him.

I stopped looking for my wallet and glanced back up at him. “I don’t typically go anywhere with people I don’t know.”

“It appears that you don’t go anywhere with the people you do know, either,” he quipped.

His first joke was cute, but the second? Right back to asshole territory. I scoffed, my fist tightening around the ticket as I turned and edged my way around the ropes, walking toward the sidewalk near the road.

“Wait!” The same hand splayed over my shoulder and tugged me back. I hadn’t even heard his footsteps against the pavement behind me, his height giving him the edge to close the distance in fewer strides than my own. It wasn’t hard to do, I wasn’t as tall as a lot of the other girls I’d grown up with, and compared to him, I felt even smaller. “I’m sorry. I’m not used to...I’m just sorry. Okay?”

I turned again to face him, watching as his fingers scraped through his hair which had shifted with his movement. I narrowed my eyes on his bicep that flexed beside his head, my eyes flaring in recognition at one of the many tattoos that sprawled along his arm—a black and gray clock, distorted around the frame with four hands instead of two, dipping into several of the numbers almost as if it were melting, frame and all. The tattoo resembled Dali’s famous impressionist piece but was more inimical and far more haunting. Kind of like the man in front of me was.

And then it all clicked.

“Briggs? Andrews, right?” He visibly stiffened. “You were in my history class years ago.” The tattoo was hard to forget, though it used to be on a smaller, skinnier boy. Not a well-built man. I sat behind that singular tattoo for months, wondering why the clock was as distorted as I sometimes felt. Why the hands seemed to reach for a time that wasn’t coming. “Shuster High, right?” I added because his face seemed to drop right after I said his name and it hadn’t shifted since. But if this was Briggs...well, Briggs always seemed like a decent enough guy even if that was about seven years ago.

His jaw clenched as he reached his hand out, thumb pointed up to the black night sky above us. “That’s me. And you’re...”

“Rose. Rose Fields.” His calluses grated along my palm and fingertips as I pushed my hand into his. I glanced at his cracked knuckles—a complete contradiction to how put-together he appeared.

Briggs smiled dimly. “Rose, will you please forgive me and let me take you off the street? I don’t think I can stomach the 50-foot woman alone.” He released his hold on my hand, pushing the one I shook into his pocket and holding his ticket back up with the other, flicking it with his finger.

He wasn’t August, but he wasn’t exactly unattractive either, and he did buy two tickets, one, apparently, meant for me. And that tattoo...*that tattoo* had been in my thoughts for years.

I cleared my throat and nodded, realizing I'd been silently staring at him. Again. "Yeah, I think I can do that. Thanks."

Briggs waited for me to pass him before he started to move, his sneakers tapping the pavement in even, calculated strides. I wished he'd move in front of me and give me an unobstructed view of his arm while we made our way inside. But there seemed to be a reason for letting me lead the way that went beyond being a gentleman, even as we found our seats.

The moment the theater darkened, I felt his gaze linger on my hand and where I kept my phone, sending pinpricks of awareness through me. Briggs was watching me, not the movie, possibly wondering when I'd leave or when the other person would show. I almost wished I had the same expectations that he did, but I knew August wasn't showing. And as strange as it was, I was sort of okay with that.