

24. MEMORIES OF ME

I quickly realized that if I kept playing with fire that I was going to get burned. Try as I may, I knew how terrible I was at avoiding the oncoming flames. I had been balancing Rose and June, all the while existing in the nether world between them. But the fuse had already been lit. And the explosion was about to be ignited. I just needed to take cover.

“Clay told me that you and he were fooling around.”

I felt embarrassed.

Rose advised, “Don’t worry, honey. I told him to treat you right.”

I was confused: “You don’t mind?”

“I’m not the possessive type. You just have to enjoy life. Never regret a thing.”

She was too full of resignation for me.

“We didn’t do anything.”

“He got you all excited.”

“I don’t like to be teased like that.”

“Chloe, I told you that you were too uptight. Just living in your head.”

I wasn’t sure if she was being sympathetic to me. Did she derive a strange power from manipulating me?

“It’s time to start living. We’ll meet after school.”

She left me to finish lunch by myself. I still wasn’t sure what she had in mind.

I wanted to tell myself that I wasn’t going to give in to her coaxing. I didn’t like how her influence had made me into someone so needy.

“You had a chance with Clay.”

“You are really messing with me. I’m not like you. I want something more from a guy.”

“There isn’t anything more. You’ve seen your parents. The only difference is that you need to learn how to enjoy your life. Otherwise, you’ll grow up all bitter.”

“I’m not really into giving a stupid guy that much of myself.”

“If he makes you feel good, you shouldn’t complain.”

Rose wasn’t any older than I was. What made her act so much more mature?

“It’s my experiences. I’m no longer afraid to be myself. I don’t need adults to tell me what is and what isn’t OK.”

“I just don’t want to screw things up and get blamed for it.”

I was worrying about things more than ever. That didn’t stop me from finishing my homework. But I felt if I wasn’t drinking with Rose that I couldn’t quiet down my uneasiness.

“You just have to learn how to be touched.”

Again, Rose was scaring me. It was almost as if she was coming on to me. Was that her game with Clay?

“In the end, it doesn’t matter who you’re with. Just as long as you’re both digging it.”

“Rose, I don’t like any of this. I don’t want to get used.”

“It’s part of being human. It’s biology. Nothing is certain. Just like a disease. When it happens, it sort of take you over. And you can’t do anything about it. You can’t control it. You can only enjoy it.”

I didn’t want to give in to that kind of silliness.

“You’ve already gone too far. You can’t turn back now.”

What was she telling me?

Despite Rose’s urging, I still found her offer to be perverse. Clay made me feel like an adult. But I didn’t want to get passed around like a football. I’d leave the sports to the other kids. Jack had already shown an interest in me. I was waiting for the follow up. I felt as if I was going to have to do something extreme to attract his attention. I just wasn’t going to play dumb, and do something like fail Math so that he could come to my rescue.

I told him, “I’ve been waiting to talk to you.”

Jack seemed a lot shier than I was. Nevertheless, I felt really special around him. I knew that Amy was somewhere resenting our moment. But I couldn’t let it bother me.

“I thought that you forgot about me.”

It had seemed like a lifetime since he had said anything to me. What had he been thinking? Perhaps, the only reason that I wanted to be with Jack was that it made me feel as if I was popular. I couldn’t overlook the fact that other girls wanted to get with him. And it gave me a rush that he was into me. I hated to admit that I was like this. I felt as if I was changing my nature. Was this what it meant to be human? I had trouble even acknowledging that part of myself.

I truly wondered if he might have some special power to make me feel alive. It had been no simple coincidence that girls would almost swoon in his presence. I didn’t want appear to be so vulnerable. But I was attracted by his enchantment. I dreamed about our first kiss. I would simply melt to his touch. I wouldn’t be able to help myself. Biology would just take over.

I let myself dwell on the feeling. I seemed to recall the scent of a jacket, anything to get me going. I was a hound ready to chase down her prey. I let myself get carried away.

Thinking about the kiss seemed way more ideal than it could possibly be. That thought hardly slowed me down. It only encouraged the fantasy.

I wanted him to go easy on me. If I imagined perfection, I wanted to be gratified in my dream. And I left it up to him to guide me in this adventure. He was way more experienced than anything that I could know. That bugged me a little. He wasn’t any more intelligent. But his confidence intimidated me. And I didn’t want to seem like a little girl.

“Let’s meet for pizza sometime.”

I was glowing. Everything was happening so quickly. I was afraid that I was going to say the wrong thing. I worked to regain my composure.

“Yeah, sometime would be great.”

He was quick to respond, “Tomorrow, at 5:30.”

This was a dinner date. I wanted to panic.

“Angela’s?”

I had to be sure that we were talking about the same place.

After he made his invitation, I could hardly think about anything else that day. I held on as I worked my way through each class. When the bell rang to dismiss us at the end of the day, I felt such a relief.

I wanted to find Rose to tell her. But she was not around at all. I was going to have to savor the news on my own. I didn’t even see her the next day. This almost seemed planned on her part. She was sending me out in the world to fly on my own.

Indeed for the whole day, I was walking on air. I briefly saw Jack to confirm our get-together. I was totally light-headed. Nothing seemed to phase me. I dove into the glitter. I relished my magic moment.

I was extra careful picking out something to wear. I wanted to look perfect. But I had never been so devoted to fashion. I didn't want to become like June. If I was going to impress Jack, I need to do it with character. That sounded just silly. He wanted daring; he wanted sex appeal. I did everything that I could to prepare.

As I slid down the stairs, my mother confronted me.

"Now, where do you think that you're going?"

"I told you that I was going to meet my friend, Jack, for pizza."

She mulled over her words, "Your friend Jack. Is he cute?"

She wanted to pry.

"Don't embarrass me!"

"He's the one who should be embarrassed. Doesn't he have the courtesy to meet you at your house?"

I had never thought about it that way. It just seemed natural to meet him at the mall. Now I had to consider a whole new set of rules.

"I'm just hiding him from you!"

"I don't need your flippant attitude, Chloe. I'm your mother."

She always pulled out that card when she seemed at her wit's end.

"You shouldn't try to have an answer to everything that I tell you," she added.

I realized that I was a little embarrassed, not for Jack, more for myself. I didn't want to mess this up. June would turn it all to her advantage. She didn't need to ruin things for Jack and me. I was worried enough already.

I was afraid that he would try to control our experience together. I imagined him ordering the pizza and expecting me to go along with his choices. Fortunately, it didn't work out like that. For the time being, he was the perfect gentleman.

After eating, he asked me if I wanted to go for a walk. It seemed so natural. He reached for my hand. There we were walking hand in hand. I held his hand tighter just to make sure that it was real. I wanted to kiss him then and there. We could sneak around to a vacant corner. No one would be watching.

His moment came. He sensed the drama. He tried to kiss me, then he just seemed to freeze up. That only made me like him more. I didn't feel as if he was trying to force me. It made me feel special.

He ended up walking me back to my place. The walk went on forever. It was already dark by the time that we got back to my place. He gave me a hug. As I walked away, he gave me a pat on the shoulder. I almost turned back to let him kiss me. But I was seized by a bout of fear. As he walked away, I ran to the door. I didn't want the mystery to fade.

Once inside, I realized that I was still in a daze. I ran up to my room. I had homework to do. I also wanted to avoid an interrogation from June. She had heard me come in, but she didn't want to disturb me

"He's shitting you!"

"What do you mean?"

Rose finally assumed her place after being among the *living dead*.

“You can’t trust that little twerp.”

“How so?” I was quick to defend him.”

“For one thing, he’s been with Amy. And she’s a major gossip.”

“Been with? How do you mean?”

Rose was too graphic for my elevated mood, “He thinks he’s some kind of stud. What do you think goes on in that haunted house of his? He deflowers young girls.”

I imagined Dracula floating in through an open window.

“You don’t think that he’s hypnotize me, do you?”

“Let me stare into your eyes and see if I can tell.”

We both laughed.

“I still like him.”

“Like him if you will. Sleep with him if you must. But never give him your heart.”

She knew how inexperienced I was. That was why she wanted me to sample Clay. There would have been less after-effects.

“You’re going to have to get it out of your system, one way or another.”

I went back to eating my sandwich. Rose sounded so clinical.

I could feel the pressure growing on me. I wasn’t used to this. Too much of me was out there, up for grabs. I hated being a sitting duck. I just wanted to roll up in a little ball and hide. I was expected to be way more adult than I wanted to be. If I didn’t do the right thing, I’d just be screwed for the rest of my life.

I did my best to relax. Sure, Jack liked me. But I wasn’t sure if I could trust him. It wasn’t just that Amy seemed to be hovering around all the time. I wasn’t sure what were his motives. His shyness was all part of his act.

I saw him in the hall. He came up to me, and gave me a big hug. I could tell that this was for show. I could hear the chatter. I looked around, and all the girls were looking at me and pointing. I tossed my hair and walked on as if I couldn’t care less.

I needed to investigate better what I was getting myself into. Seeing him in the hall had set the nervousness again in motion. I was lucky to be able to concentrate during the rest of the day. I had no idea what was going to happen next.

“I need to see you!”

“I met a new guy. We had plans.”

Rose could understand a call for help. She rushed to meet at our favorite spot. She brought some liquid refreshment to give me the courage that I needed.

“You’re getting yourself in deep.”

“I know. I know. Is he really a jerk?”

“He said thing to me once, and I thought that I was a girl of the world. I think that he’s got into his dad’s porn collection.”

“Sounds like an upstanding guy. When I see him, he seems like a character from a Disney movie.”

She handed me the bottle.

“Yeah, the evil warlock. Haven’t you seen his fangs?”

She made some silly motion and darted at me. I jumped. We both shrieked in glee.

“I don’t think it’s that bad.”

“He’s like a serial killer. He has to mark his victims.” Rose tried to be very precise. I had visions of Halloween. Was this what I was getting into? I imagined waking with bite marks on my neck.

“You do make sure that your windows are bolted shut.”

“This isn’t the Nineteenth century.”

“It is until you have a good roll in the hay.”

“You are sounding very saucy.”

“I’ve told you what good sex does to open up your eyes. It lets you live as one with the world.”

She gave me the strangest stare. I looked away.

“Rose, why do you like freaking me out?”

“You’re such an easy target. Better I shake you up than lover boy.”

I was trying to focus on the gentle image that I had created of Jack. Rose was blurring it up.

“What next?”

“I don’t know. I was sure that he was going to kiss me on our pizza night. It didn’t happen.”

“He’s softening you up.”

“Now it’s Hansel and Gretel?”

“Pick the tale. There all the same. A ravenous monster feasting on a helpless girl.”

I gave her a funny face, “I don’t feel so helpless.”

“Then quit imagining him as a gentle giant. Get in there, and let him swing you around.”

“I’m not heading in for the spin cycle.”

“You might as well be like that. He’s already done a number on your mind. You’ve got to turn the tables. Take him for a roll, and then roll him out.”

“You are nasty!”

“Why do you think that you were given a body like that? You’ve got to use it.”

“I’ve always felt sort of scrawny.”

“Guys like girls like you. You make them feel wholesome.”

“You’re making me feel like a nun.”

“You’re acting like one. Take off the damn habit and get busy.”

I gave her a push. I wasn’t going to take commands from anyone. She pushed me back, and then we hugged.

“I need another drink,” I told her.

“Good idea.” She handed me the bottle. I took a swig and handed it back. We were partners in crime.

“You know what you have to do!”

“Yeah, cut off his head and stab a stake through his heart.”

“He’s the one with the stake.” We both giggled.

Rose shook me.

“I don’t know if I can go through with it.”

“Every conspirator since the beginning of history has wondered about her role in such

important manners.”

I asked, “Is that why they invented alcohol?”

“Courage needs to be bottled.”

“What do I do now?”

“Go home and sleep it off. Call me in the morning.”

“What if there is no morning?”

Indeed, I was a little sluggish the next morning. Neither June nor Bill noticed my stupor. By the time that I got to class, I was prepared for anything. That was what I told myself. I just needed to fight off the sleepiness. All the Math and all the English Lit weren’t enough to put this girl back together again.

Late in the school day, Jack tracked me down in the hall.

“Why don’t you come over Friday? My parents are going to be out of town.”

He could barely disguise his intentions. There was something terribly ominous about his invitation. I didn’t feel that I needed his parents as the overlords to watch over our fun. But Jack was hardly giving me a chance to catch my breath.

“I’m not sure that it’s a good night for me,” I was trying to make a lame excuse. He could easily see through my hesitation. I wasn’t sure if he would call me on my blatant subterfuge.

“We could make it another time.”

As if there was another time. He knew how easily he could exaggerate my reticence.

“I did have plans. I could see if I could get out of them.”

Had I told Rose that we were going to be hanging out? Was that the out that I was trading on?

I didn’t know what to think.

When I finally got back to him, I thought that I had blown my chance. He had been so forthcoming, and I had thrown every road block in his way. I had heard things about Jack that started to cloud my pristine image. I didn’t want to let them upset my plans. If the rumors were true, then Jack was a master at hiding his actual intentions. I envisioned him perfecting his method. He came off as a child star, all wide-eyed and caring. It took a real expertise to effect that pose. Any signs of intention on his part would betray his theater.

I played back our date at the pizza place. Nothing in his gestures gave him away. He was the perfect gentleman. He even seemed awkward at times. He couldn’t have faked that. I was letting down my guard to someone who could prove to be my complete undoing.

“I’d love to be there.”

I had sealed my fate. I was surrendering my sense of security. Before our pizza night, I had felt apprehensive. This was different. I wanted to exercise caution. But there was little that I could count on to ease me through my concerns. I was floating through the ether.

I did my best to get ready for the night. I felt a little insecure. I worried that I didn’t look attractive enough for him. That would only make him want to turn me over for some other girl like Amy. I couldn’t imagine myself getting pushed aside so easily. So I did use all my resources to enhance my look. The mirror seemed to encourage me. And I hated my vanity. I was setting myself up for embarrassment.

As I made my way up sidewalk to his door, I was filled with a queasy feeling. What was

Jack expecting from me? I needed to be better prepared for a moment like this. My queasiness made it difficult to restrain my unease. The house looked back at me with a ghostly silence. This was the warning that I had so helplessly sought. I was being told by these ghastly spirits to halt my progress. If I continued, I was only allying myself with the infernal powers.

I needed a blessing. I needed strength. My gait was a little wobbly. I tried to shake off my faintness. I was losing it! There was no reason to keep on with the madness. I had been told!

For the time being, he seemed to be marshaling all the demons that inhabited this locale. I started to feel silly. I was letting my imagination get the best of me. What did I actually have to fear.

“I know what I’m doing!”

I was going to take charge. This girl was going to own the night.

From the moment that he opened the door, everything seemed beyond my wildest aspirations. This was the dream home of a Cinderella. I hated the fact that I was so easily dazzled. But I just gave in. The explosive glow was just too hard to take. I needed to shield my eyes.

I tried to say something. I was impressed by it all. And anything that I said would come out sounding all wrong. Why was he being so nice to me? I felt privileged just being invited here.

I attempted to get my bearings. I had never been so vulnerable to the world. My defenses were useless at warding off the magic. I did a double take. Perhaps, something was not right. All that glitters was not gold. I touched things in an effort to confirm my suspicions. But I could find no big secrets to help me out. I remained bewildered.

I needed to put it all in perspective. He lived here all the time. He probably took it all for granted. Nevertheless, any girl who entered this house believed that she was being accepted into royalty. And I was just as giddy. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to whisk me away to his bedroom. I wanted to stay here forever.

As I looked around, the myth started to fade. There were darker spirits here who were revealing their truths to me.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m doing great?”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He couldn’t read my mind. But what was I telling him? Did he have his own psychic powers that blessed him with his exuberant confidence?.

I did my best to recover. I couldn’t let on what I was thinking.

“Lovely place.”

“It keeps me entertained.”

He seemed so nonchalant. It frightened me. I needed to regain my composure. It wasn’t as if I was standing next to a warlock.

I looked in his face. I was having a hard time seeing the boyish innocence that had seemed so attractive in the past.

This had nothing to do with the place. This was all about Jack. I was getting to know him better. I had created this image in mind. Up until this point, he had lived up to my

expectations. But he was a real person, not just some cardboard cutout. I needed to give him a chance to tell me who he was. I needed to dispel my fears. He was giving me the opportunity to come into the light. I was the one who was remaining lost in the shadows.

I needed to get over my reticence. I still wasn't sure why I was holding back. I was being silly. Jack was a nice guy. I could easily accept his hospitality. No matter what, I was here to enjoy myself. I wasn't taking an exam. I had nothing to be afraid of.

I still had to figure out my options. I looked all around the house. I was scanning for alternative exits if I got trapped. What was I thinking?

June had been so successful at instilling her method that I couldn't get rid of her influence. I observed all the restless phantoms battling it out for my eternal soul. I had to take up my position as the resolute non-believer. I clapped my hands to make all the spirits disappear.

"What was that about?" Jack asked.

"Just a little game that I play with myself."

"Maybe you could teach me sometime."

What had I just told him?

Jack led me from the kitchen to the patio. He turned on a spotlight.

You've got a pool."

"Yeah," he shrugged it off as if it was an embarrassment.

"Must be fun!"

"Do you want to go for a swim?"

I didn't want to make anything too easy for him, "I'm allergic to chlorine."

"Seriously?"

"I didn't bring a suit."

"I could give you one of my sister's."

"I didn't know that you had a sister."

"Yeah, she's away at college."

Everyone was conveniently away.

"Maybe another time." I wasn't sure if there was going to be another time. But I really wasn't in to water sports this evening.

"What do you want to do?" he looked bored. "Video games?"

"I'm not that into games either."

"How about something to drink?"

I thought about it, "I'll have a Sprite."

"I was thinking about something more adult."

"Oh, I'll have some wine." I wanted to appear to be mature. I also needed to slow things down. He didn't need any more advantages. He was already playing on his home turf.

"We could watch a movie."

"Sounds like fun"

I didn't feel as if I had very much to say. I was letting him guide me through his menagerie.

"Sit down and relax."

I sat across from him on a chair."

"Sit next to me!"

I moved over to the couch. He put his arm around me, and we settled in. It all felt so natural. I wanted to make sure that was all that he had in store.

“What are we watching?”

“It’s a horror movie. You don’t recognize it.”

“I’m not a big fan of horror. We could watch something else.”

“I bet you like romance.”

He was doing his best to embarrass me. “I’m not a big movie fan.”

“You’re not bored with me?”

“No, it’s all great. I love the wine. It’s so grown-up.”

I wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to say. He smiled. I had the strangest feeling that this was all second nature for him. He had none of the shyness that he gave off during the day. He was studying me like his prey in the wild.

“I’m okay.” I seemed to be answering an unasked question.

“I’ll put this in.”

He put in another movie and resumed his position next to me.

“You don’t smoke?”

I assumed that he meant dope. I shook my head.

“Neither do I. Just drink.”

He was totally in control of the moment. I settled back so that he wouldn’t get the best of me. All this time, I really liked Jack. But now he was starting to creep me out.

“You’re pretty cute.”

“Does this stuff work?”

“What are you talking about? The wine?”

“No, your whole routine. Inviting girls up to the house when you’re parents are away. Getting them drunk.”

“I’m not about that. I’m not who you think I am.”

“Seriously?”

He tried to make up for his mistakes, “I really like you.”

“I think that you told me that already.”

“Do you want to leave?”

“I’m not sure.”

He seemed a little angry, “Any girl in school would kill to be up here with me.”

“Jack, I’m not any girl in school.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. Sometimes, I’m not so good with my words.”

I was hardly ready to help him out. He was really destroying the moment.

“Do you want to kiss me?” His invitation came out of nowhere and was even clumsier than anything else that he had said up to this point.

“I should go.”

“Don’t!”

“I like being here with you. But I don’t feel that safe. Your parents aren’t here. And you’re freaking me out a bit.”

“Stay!”

“I can’t. I want to leave. Maybe another time.”

“There probably won’t be another time.”

“Jack, that’s OK. I don’t really think that we’re that good for each other.”

“You’re really acting like a bitch. What’s your problem?”

“My only problem is that I want to go.”

“I can drive you.”

“Sure you can! You’re trashed. I’m going to walk home.”

“I’ve only had one drink.”

“You were acting kind of weird when you picked me up.”

He was helpless. He had tried raising his voice with me. It only showed how frustrated he had become. His act had totally failed to impress me. He was floored. No one had ever done this to me.

I bet Amy must have felt triumphant that our rendezvous turned into such a disaster. I just found him to be a total dick.

I did all that I could to ignore what had happened. And I was shaking. It had taken a great deal on my part to confront Jack. I knew that I was doing the right thing. But everything was happening so fast. I was doing my best just to keep up. I couldn’t let it get to me. I simply didn’t want to believe. Slowly, it was all dawning on me. I did my best to cast off the demons. I could feel them encircling. I needed my resolve. I bit my lip and did my best not to cry. I didn’t want to think of myself as a baby.

As I walked away from his house, I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. I suddenly felt lucky just to have left there intact. For all his apparent shyness, I realized that I had truly been in the presence of a sociopath. He was unlikely to have hurt me. But he knew what to do when time came. He could dig deep and just tear a person apart. I really didn’t give him a chance. But I could tell what was coming. If I had given in, things would have been a lot worse. For the time being, he would have owned my soul.

I tried to keep my speculation in check. Sure I was giving in to my imagination. But I was quite perceptive. Jack ruled his kingdom without any restraint. His parents were there to feed his every whim. And the more that he consumed, the hungrier that he got. Most girls could barely resist his charm. It came with the territory. He simply had to reach out in this den of his, and everything was at hand. Even if a girl went along with his madness, he would eventually sour on her. That was all part of his game. And he knew how to turn the tables with haste. The unsuspecting girl would start to doubt herself. He would aggravate all her uncertainties.

There was nothing tender in his method. Here was a python in his lair. The more that the girl sought mercy, the more Jack felt invigorated. It gave him strength. It puffed up his ego. It gave definition to his body. His idea became haunted flesh!

I didn’t want to give substance to my premonition. He had done little to betray his actual intentions. That was why he was so skillful. He knew how to make the girl do the work. Even though I had completely resisted, he had still got under my skin. I felt guilty just seeing him for what he was.

I wanted to let Rose talk through me. Instead of leaving, I could have simply adopted a path of least resistance. Rose would have berated my lack of experience. In her hands she would have made short work of him. She would have left his place after a night of fun. It wouldn’t have mattered if he didn’t care an iota for her. He knew what to do with his body. She would

have surrendered to the moment and found delight in her pleasure. Moreover, she would have exacted her revenge as she made a quick exit. She'd leave him wanting more. But there would be no follow up. She would simply dismiss the little cur.

I wondered why I couldn't summon her courage. Ultimately, it would have all been for nought. I hadn't been there to ravage his body. I thought that he really cared about me. Sure, I was a little naive. But he had given me enough evidence to make me believe that there was more going on. Confronted by this stark reality, I knew that I had no choice.

I had balanced on the high wire and come through without a scratch. I had been afraid to look down while I accomplished my feat. But I couldn't keep it up. That was Rose's act. She could stare down the precipice. No wonder, she could handle amateurs like Jack. In her eyes, I had crumbled when faced with something real. I should have simply accepted my passage into adulthood for what it was. He could make me a woman. And I needed to embrace my fate.

Did Jack and Rose share their madness? What had happened to their souls? I admired Rose's ability to overcome such dilemmas. For my part, I was totally helpless. But I needed to take comfort in the fact that I had walked away from the monster. Maybe, I was simply delaying the inevitable. No matter who I was with, I was always going to expect way more of him than he was willing to give me. I just couldn't let on how I felt. I hoped that Jack couldn't figure out the source of my hesitation.

I wanted to believe that I was battle worn and ready for what might come next. I wish that I hadn't been taken by that cute smile of his. I tried to imagine that the smile was a smirk as he gloated over his latest conquest.