

Quiet Night In: Longing

Chapter 1

Crisp air filled Rosie's lungs. Cool and fresh and full of autumnal aroma; crinkled tree leaves and moist earth. A hint of recently brewed coffee joined the natural scents, sending a tiny tingle through her senses.

She was sitting sideways in the driver seat of her mustang, her door wide open and endless nature sprawling out before her. A wide lake surrounded by wild hedges and trees. The water a mirror of the pale blue sky, calm and still.

It was a beautiful place. One she came to as often as her busy schedule would allow.

No thoughts. No worries. No stress.

She reached for the coffee in her cup holder, raised the disposable cup to her lips, took her first sip.

Fire scorched its way down her throat, heated her belly and sent a comfortable glow through her chest. A tiny shudder coursed up her spine. Rosie shut her eyes, shoulders slumping, and let out a contented sigh.

"Ahh," she breathed softly.

This. This was what she needed today.

I've been too wound up lately.

Between her studies, her roomie's new boytoy, the constant attention she was getting from guys, and the ever-looming threat of exams and tests and failure, her dorm room was beginning to feel like a prison cell.

If she had to turn down another party invitation – or, worse, have to *justify* her turning down of party invitations to Jade – she'd lose her mind.

She took another sip, looking out at the serene scene.

If not for the mustang, Rosie didn't know how she'd have gotten this far. Her own little escape from the pressure.

Old as it was, the car was in good shape. No engine troubles or mechanical issues what-so-ever. Sure, it was dented and scratched in places, and the interior had its fair share of stains and tears. But those little scuffs gave the car *character*. It was the girl with a dirt smudge on her face, days-old, chipped nail polish, shadowed eyes. It was the car with a story. A personality.

A reminder of Amber.

When she closed her eyes, Rosie saw plump red lips. Frazzled blonde hair. Dark eyeliner around inviting eyes.

She took another sip of coffee.

If not for the car's engine being off, Rosie would've turned on the old cassette player. Loaded with a mix tape of Amber's making, full of eighties rock anthems and grunge hits. Where her sister had gotten the cassette player, or even found a way to make her own mix tapes, Rosie had no idea. But there it was. For whenever she was feeling homesick.

Well, perhaps not *homesick*. More like *Amber-sick*.

Longing for those nights spend with her sister's arms wrapped around her, where nothing else in the world mattered.

There was a pang in her chest as she thought about it.

"Hey little sister," Rosie hummed softly, "what have you done?"

In the back of her mind, the echo of a memory flared. Amber, singing this song one quiet night. Her voice more musical than any song Rosie cared to hear.

"Hey little sister," she continued with a smile. "Who's the only one?"

The longing ache remained, but was tempered by the memory.

She sat there for a little while. Sipping coffee and staring out at nothing in particular.

Enjoying the cool air, the green and gold leaves, the bright reflection in the lake. Sifting through wonderful memories. Reminders of why she was working so hard, doing so much, putting up with Jade's constant attempts to 'hook her up' with guy friends.

When there was no more coffee to sip, she set the cup back down in the cup holder. Shut the mustang's door. Started the engine.

The car purred to life.

"Back to the grind," she said to herself, squaring her shoulders and steadying herself. "Nice day to start again."

She grinned, turned the cassette player on, hit the gas.

"So," Jade said as soon as Rosie entered the room, "who is he?"

Rosie froze in surprise, looked at Jade with wide eyes.

"Caught red handed!" Jade said victoriously, straightening and puffing out her chest.

"I *knew* it! You've got a boyfriend!"

"I... I do?"

"Where else would you be going so much?" Her roomie nodded her head, smug in victory. "Too long to just be 'getting coffee' and not long enough to be some secret hobby. You're going out and getting laid!"

"Uh," Rosie blinked. "I am?"

"I knew the whole 'good girl' thing was an act. And always turning guys down. You have a secret boyfriend!"

"I..." Rosie rolled her eyes. "Sure, you got me."

Jade's eyes narrowed. "Wait... But if you had a boyfriend, you'd have introduced me by now. No way you'd hide him away from your bestie like that... Not unless..." Her eyes shot wide open. Her hand flew up, finger pointing accusingly at Rosie. "You're fucking a professor!"

"What?!" Rosie squeaked. "No! I-"

"Which one is it?" Jade took Rosie's hands, pulled her to a bed and all but forced her to sit on it. "So *that's* how lil' miss perfect always gets good grades! I knew there was something up with-"

"No!" Rosie said, face flushed. "I'm not- I didn't-"

"A professor's sugar-baby? I knew you had a wicked side to you! Can't hide a minx, no matter how many sweaters you put on her!"

God help me.

Once Jade got going, there was no stopping her. All Rosie could do was shut her mouth and wait for her roommate to wear herself out. She wiggled herself, got comfortable, and settled in for another arduous few hours with Jade.

As Jade asked her endless questions, never giving Rosie a chance to answer, Rosie herself looked out the dorm room window. At the bright blue sky. The fluffy white clouds. Barely listening to Jade, she imagined she was someplace else. With *someone* else.

"So?" An echo of Jade's voice was saying. "What'd'ya say? Gonna hook a sister up? Might as well make the most of you slurpin' Professor Reece's shlong! Christ knows I could do with some credits in..."

The words trailed off as Rosie stopped listening entirely.

Knowing Jade, she'd come to some 'realisation' that her theory *must* be wrong. They'd go back to square one of 'where did Rosie go so often' and 'why didn't Rosie want a boyfriend'.

And, of course, after that Jade would go on a long tangent about her newest conquest. Her new 'guy friend' that, a week from now, she'd try to pawn off onto Rosie while she chased after someone new.

By this point, it was practically a routine they went through.

"Shit," Jade sighed dramatically. "That's right. With your scores, you couldn't be fuckin' just one professor. You'd have to be boning all of them. And *that* I don't see happening..."

"Mm'hm," Rosie murmured.

"So who is he?" Jade demanded with a pout. "This secret boyfriend! You gotta tell me!"

"I don't have a boyfriend," Rosie repeated for the millionth time.

Night times were the worst.

Jade's snoring was unpleasantly loud, though even *that* was preferable to when she had a 'guy friend' over. Pretending to sleep through *that* unholy, screeching disaster was not easy. And, whenever she failed to convince her roomie that she was sound asleep, Jade always, *always* invited her to 'join in'.

But no, that wasn't the worst of it.

It was the lack of physical contact. The sensations that were obvious in their absence, the warm breath on her skin and the shallow breathing that never failed to soothe Rosie to sleep.

That was what made nights unbearable.

The conspicuous void next to her.

As Jade's snores filled the silence, Rosie sat up in bed. Looked around the dark room.

Her heart pounded.

In the back of her mind, she made a decision. And, before she could give herself the chance to second guess it, she climbed right out of bed.

Cool air tickled her skin.

Her nightie only reached to her knees, and didn't come close to her elbows. All that bare skin was pimply in moments.

Quietly as she could, she collected some clothes, a few textbooks, her phone. Her keys.

All the essentials.

Wearing nothing but her nightie, some slippers, and a hastily thrown on jumper, Rosie crept out of her dorm room. A backpack slung over her shoulder, brimming with determination.

I'm going to regret this later.

But not right then. And that was all that mattered.

She made her way through the dorm building, down to the parking lot outside. Where her mustang waited.

By the time she reached the car door, had it open, her heart was racing. Pounding away in her chest. Her body tingled with excitement. A thrill that was in equal parts exhilarating and nauseating.

This is stupid, some quiet, rational part of her mind told her. *This isn't me.*

And yet here she was.

Rosie climbed inside the car, shut the door, put the key in the ignition. Hesitated.

Is this really what I want?

No.

And yes.

Maybe?

"I don't know," Rosie said, voice oddly calm.

But I'm going to do it anyway.

She turned the key.

The mustang purred.

And off she went. Driving dark, abandoned roads. Following the same route she

always took to her secret, private place – her little lake away from college. Only, when she came to the fateful crossroads this time, she turned the other way.

One direction led to the pretty lake. The other was the beginning of a long trip home.

I can turn around at any time, she reassured herself. *I can always change my mind.*

She hit the music.

...But I won't.

A wide grin split her lips as the sweet song of an electric guitar filled the mustang.

She only stopped to sleep, pulling over somewhere out of the way and using a bulky sweater as a blanket. And to take 'care of business'. Using a small diner's restroom after enjoying a warm breakfast and coffee.

The miles drifted by, scenery changing as morning became afternoon became evening.

Oddly enough, the further she got from college, the more confident she grew. The anxiety faded and resolve seeped in to replace it. She was going home. She had no idea how long for, or what she'd say to her parents, but that's where she was headed. Home. To Amber.

It was only when she began seeing familiar landmarks that Rosie's anxiety resurfaced.

Not far now.

The thought was gut-wrenching as much as it was comforting.

What am I going to tell Mom and Dad?

They weren't going to be happy about her ditching college, to say the least. Their 'perfect daughter' doing something so reckless... Rosie gripped the steering wheel tighter.

What if Amber isn't there?

So many months now without contact. Not a single conversation between them in so long...

What if she's moved on? What if-

Her heart lurched.

Someone as pretty and amazing as Amber... It wouldn't be difficult for her to find a partner. A replacement.

The urge to turn around and go back flared.

But she kept driving on, closer and closer to home. The knot in her gut growing with every minute, every familiar sight.

When she came to a stop, it was on the sidewalk right outside her parents' house.

Weird. When had she started thinking of it as her parents' home, and not *her* home? And why did she feel so... so...

Rosie shook her head, killed the mustang's engine.

It was plenty light outside. Late afternoon, but not quite evening yet. The sky was pale blue. The lawns around her were covered in fallen leaves, her parents' included. The only completely tidy lawn belonged to Mr Henderson.

"Must've found someone else to rake it," Rosie said.

The driveway to her parents' house was empty. Which meant neither of them were home. But what about Amber?

Rosie gulped, opened her car door, climbed out.

The walk towards the house felt longer than she remembered.

She's not home. Her 'crotch rocket' isn't here.

Still, Rosie hoped.

As she unlocked the house's front door, let herself inside, she mouthed a silent prayer. A greedy wish.

The house was quiet, though.

Rosie closed the front door behind herself, made her way through the house in a mystified daze.

Everything was... the same.

So why did it feel so weird being back here?

Why did she feel like she was breaking in to a stranger's home?

She strolled through the house, lost in the indescribable sensation of being lost in time. Exploring a place that was so still it seemed downright frozen.

"Welcome home," she told herself, the words sounding hollow.

Then she headed upstairs.

Not to her room, but to her sister's.

Even if Amber wasn't here, her things were. That'd have to be good enough.

Rosie walked to Amber's bedroom door, smiled at the ancient 'keep out' sign that'd been there for as long as she could remember. She hesitated for a moment before reaching for the doorknob, turning it and letting herself inside.

The room was dark, large blackout curtains blocking the window. But Rosie knew the room well enough, and it didn't seem like much had changed. Rock posters on the walls, trash and clothes littered over the floor, a random stool with an empty pizza box open on it.

A smile pulled at Rosie's lips.

She basked in the scent of the room. The dirt and oil aroma she'd come to adore after spending so much time with her sister.

And there, that bunched up lump on the bed; it almost looked as if Amber was there. Curled up under the sheets. Just the hint of frazzled blonde hair poking out under the cocoon of cloth.

Rosie's heart hiccupped.

She took a hesitant step forward, not allowing herself to believe it. Restraining her joy as best she could.

As she neared, the blanket cocoon shifted.

A soft, beautiful mumble sounded from the bed.

Rosie's breath caught in her throat.

The sound caused the sleeping form to shift a little more.

She stepped closer, pulled like a moth to flame. Inching closer to her sleeping sister until she stood over the bed, staring down at a hedge of blonde hair.

Rosie knelt down.

And, as she did, the blonde head turned. Bright blue eyes blinked up at her.

Before she knew what was happening, Amber's arms were around her, pulling her down onto the bed. Rosie gasped, the sound cut off as Amber pressed her lips to Rosie's, caressed her face.

The world was whole again.

Rosie met her sister's slow kiss with equal tenderness, basking in the heat of the contact and losing herself in that moment.

"Mmmm," Amber purred when their kiss broke.

She wrapped her arms around Rosie's head, hugged her close.

"Smells just as good as the real thing," Amber whispered.

Rosie let out a tiny chuckle. "I smell terrible."

"Nu-uh," Amber said, nuzzling closer. "You're perfect."

"Far from it," Rosie said, smiling despite herself. She closed her eyes, enjoyed the sensation of her sister's embrace.

"Can't wait for Christmas," Amber murmured drowsily. She sounded on the verge of falling back to sleep. "Hug 'n' kiss you for real... Gonna... Gonna..."

"Amber," Rosie said softly. "I *am* real."

"Mm-mm," Amber gave a lazy shake of her head. "Just another dream. Pretty, pretty

dream..."

"No," Rosie beamed. "It's really me. I'm back."

Amber's sleepy eyes flitted open. At first, they were filled with nothing but dreamy affection. Then, after a moment, that affection morphed into slow confusion. And – finally – realisation came like the lash of a whip, Amber's eyes shooting wide open as her sleepiness vanished in an instant.

"Rosie?!" Her sister squeaked, jolting up in bed.

Rosie sat up too, cheeks rosy red.

"What're you doing here?!" Amber asked, eyes round. "Christmas break isn't for another month!"

"I, uh," Rosie blushed brighter. "I missed you."

The admission felt so immature and childish when spoken aloud. She'd ditched college and gone on a cross-country road trip just because she 'missed' her sister?

"I was..." She searched for the right words. The ones that wouldn't make her sound childish or dumb. "It's been so long and I... I *needed* to see you. I just- I needed to..."

The surprise in Amber's eyes softened into acknowledgement.

In Amber's expression, Rosie saw every reason she'd fallen for her big sister clear as day. The acceptance, the understanding that – even if she didn't know exactly why Rosie was there – she was needed. A simple confidence that promised to be a pillar for her to lean on, a shoulder for her to cry on.

When Amber smiled, it was a small, gentle thing.

And it was the most beautiful thing Rosie had ever seen.

Amber held out her arms wordlessly. Rosie needed no more invitation than that. She fell into her big sister's chest, hugged her tight as Amber wrapped her arms around Rosie's back.

"Not every day a dream comes true," Amber hummed, reaching up and running a hand through Rosie's hair. "Gotta say, though, usually you're wearing a lot less in my dreams..."

Rosie chuckled, squeezed her sister tighter.

"Mom and Dad won't be back for a while," Amber continued, a suggestive hint in her tone. "What do you say about a quick shower? Maybe a *proper* welcome home..."

"Knew it," Rosie smirked. "I *do* stink."

She held onto Amber for as long as she could, refused to let her sister go until all the aches and stresses of the last few days were gone. Even then, she only broke away because her bladder was screaming at her.

As the hug came to an end, something out of place caught Rosie's eyes. Something she hadn't noticed earlier.

Pink. Half-buried under the blanket, but visible enough that Rosie knew exactly what it was.

A big plushie. One of Rosie's.

What was it doing in Amber's room? On her bed, no less...

An image of Amber cuddling it sprang to mind. The thought made Rosie's heart hiccup.

"Come on," Amber said, taking Rosie's hand and climbing out of bed. She was wearing a faded, oversized rocker t-shirt. It was *all* she was wearing. "I know exactly what you need right now."