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Rating: T

Summary: Sometimes what you see isn't always what you get. How can one man get past the chilly façade and a jaded heart to reveal the potential underneath? AU/AH - Winner of the Rose & Emmett Twilight Challenge.

Blueberries & Copper Wire

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Chapter 1 – Queen Bees & Wannabees

“Two Stella’s and a club soda please.”

The little blonde bartender looked me up and down before giving me an innocent smile.

I swear she batted her eyes at me.

“Who’s the poor schmo who gets the club soda?”

“Me. Designated driver.” I shifted my gaze away, trying to terminate the conversation.

No such luck. Her smile grew a bit brighter.

“Aren’t you Mr. Responsible?”

Even an idiot would realize she was flirting. Most women usually did. A few years ago I would have taken advantage of it. A flash of the smile, a little aw shucks charm, and I would have had her before midnight.

But that was a few years ago.

“Yeah, something like that.”

I turned my back to the bar, effectively ending the conversation. I knew what would come next. She’d either ask if I had a girlfriend or use the ‘what’s a guy like you doing in a place like this’ line, and it would only be down hill from there.

So I gave her my back, resting my elbows on the bar and watching the crowds move around me.

As with any over crowded bar, people moved in small packs, undulating and wiggling around each other like honey bees. They all had their missions, their objectives. Go forth, find pollen. A bunch of mindless drones all after the same thing. Gratuitous gratification.

And at the center of it all, the Queen.

I hated places like this. They were shallow pools filled with even shallower people wearing designer clothes dropping the latest buzz words. It was all so fake. If someone were standing back to observe it all, I'm sure I would stuck out like a sore thumb. Instead of an expensive suit I wore jeans and an oxford. The only thing that made look like I belonged here with these people was my antique Rolex.

But unlike the others, I didn't wear it for the status or the name. I wore it for what I represented. It had been my grandfather's, a gift to him years ago. And it was my reminder of how important family was. Of why I should never get caught up in trappings like wealth, status or success.

And family was exactly why I was standing in this faux chic bar watching people talk at and over each other.

My cousin Jasper had been coming here every Wednesday night for the last few months. He'd met a girl. He was nuts about her, her friends hung out here, second verse same as the first.

I would have stopped coming a long time ago if it weren't for her. The Queen Bee.

Rosalie Hale.

The first time I'd laid eyes on her, I thought what every other guy did.

What I wouldn't give to tap that.

She was tall, easily 5'8 without the heels. But not a glamazon. There was something classically beautiful, almost ethereal about her.

I'd never willingly admit to it, but she reminded me of Grace Kelly in To Catch a Thief. How lame is that? Makes me sound like a fucking pussy.

She would have been easy enough to chalk up as a hot bimbo until we made eye contact. There was something world weary, almost sad lurking in those cornflower blue eyes.

If we'd never made eye contact, I would have been fine. I would have lusted over her, imagined what it would have been like to fuck her senseless somewhere daring, and then gone on my way.

But those eyes ruined me.

I expected them to be cold, calculating. To fit with the first impression. The queen bee ruling the hive.

Not sad, almost wistful.

It was only there for a moment before being replaced by a flat, almost lifeless expression. It reminded me of the expression 'the lights are on, but no one is home.'

And then she had settled down on a couch next to Jasper's girlfriend to talk.

From that point on, I didn't miss a Wednesday night out with him.

I was introduced to her early on. I tried to engage in conversation with Rosalie...although she immediately corrected me to call her Rose. Before I could take the conversation any further, she cut me off, excusing herself to give air kisses to some yuppie with a pink shirt.

As she walked off, she shot me a look over shoulder. It was disdainful. She'd evaluated the outside and made a snap judgment based on what she saw.

Or at least what she thought she did.

I'd been furious at first. Who was this chick and what crawled up her ass to die? It was tempting to throw in the towel right then and there.

But then when she didn't think anyone was looking, I caught that look again.

And it sucked me right back in.

I was being a hypocrite. I got pissed when people assumed things about me. Yeah, I was good looking. I had a body. But I had a brain too, and people tend to get caught up in the forest for the trees bullshit. I probably could go a few rounds with a pro football player or two. But let's see them review the structural plans for a twenty story building and find the flaws.

"Yo, Em." Jasper settled into the bar next to me, grabbing a beer off the counter.

"Sup Slim."

"Little of this, little of that." He took a sip of his beer before glancing around the room. "Listen, man, I need to ask you a favor."

"No blind dates, Slim. Not doing it again."

Jasper had been on a mission of late, setting me up with women left and right. It's not like I needed the help. I just didn't have an interest. At least not in whom he was going to hook me up with.

"It's not like that. I'm trying to score some brownie points here..."

"Fuck me, you are whipped. What do you need?"

Jasper shot a glance across the bar. His girl was huddled with a four or five other women. Rosalie sat there in the middle of it all, a far away look on her face.

She glanced up, our eyes making contact. The haunted look was gone, replaced by cold indifference.

Someone had done one hell of a number on her somewhere along the line.

"...and this guy has really been fucking with her. Got a little out of hand last night. Thought maybe you could teach her a few things. How to throw and block punches, that sort of thing."

I waved an acknowledgement at Jasper. I'd only caught the tail end of what he'd said, and it was clearly not a hookup.

"Yeah, I can do that." I pulled out my wallet, extracting a business card. "You got a pen?"

He handed me a worn silver fountain pen, the gold clip glinting in the subdued light of the bar.

"Nice Pen," I observed as I scribbled the name of the gym, a date and time on the back of the card.

"I would rather have had the watch," he shot back, a small knowing smile on his face.

"Yeah, well, you were the writer. I was never on time. Gramps knew what he was doing."

I handed Jasper the card. "Tomorrow, 6:30. Tell her tennis shoes and workout clothes. She needs to be able to move and will most likely end up getting sweaty."

Jasper frowned at me, as if put off by something I'd said. I didn't have time to read into it. I was tired of the games, tired of watching people posture.

"I'm going to head out, man. I've got some work to do. You good to get home?"

"Yeah, I'll call a cab. Good luck tomorrow. I owe you."

Waving an acknowledgement, I stepped away from the bar. I darted a quick glance over to the group of women.

Just in time to catch her look away.

I didn't have the time or the energy to worry about it and spent the rest of my night buried in schemas and specifications. My company had won the commission for the renovation of an old hospital downtown, and it would be an opportunity for me to make my name. The complex was from the late nineteenth century; and had fallen to disuse in the seventies. After years of massive abuse and abandonment, the city sold the land off to a local developer, who envisioned turning the space into high end lofts.

It was the project of a lifetime, and it could launch my career.

So I had been pouring myself into work. In the office by 7:30. Working late. Skipping lunch. Short of my Wednesday nights out, the only other thing I had going on was my time at the gym. It kept me sane, kept my brain sharp. My calendar was blocked; everyday from 6:30 to 8 I was there.

If there was one thing about me that fit the visual stereotype, I liked to sweat. It helped me clear my head.

But today, as I entered the complex, something nagged at me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it felt as though I'd forgotten something important.

Something I was supposed to do.

Oh well, it would come to me eventually.

"Hey, McCarty!"

I stopped halfway to the locker room, looking back over my shoulder to acknowledge the greeting.

"Hey Mike, what's up?"

"There is some chick waiting for you back in one of the studios. Said she was supposed to meet you here for a self defense lesson?"

Shit. The friend that needed help. I'd promised Jasper and totally forgotten.

"Thanks Mike. Is it cool if we use the room for an hour? I totally forgot, should have called today. Sorry, man."

He waved me off. "It's all squared away. She took care of it."

His star struck expression and over willingness should have been my first clue. But I was in a world of my own. I didn't think a thing about it.

I rushed through changing clothes. My t-shirt and basketball shorts a welcome exchange from the tie and stiff collar. As I laced up my running shoes, I catalogued a short list of self defense moves. Hit and defend. Pressure points. Things to watch for.

The list was still compiling in my head as I left the locker room. It would probably take two or three lessons for it all to sink in. Jasper mentioned the girl was being hassled, so it would be important to push her, make her learn through hands on exposure. If she wanted to protect herself, she'd have to dive in and learn the hard way.

The studios all had padded floors, having been designed for kick boxing and other contact activities. If I pulled out another mat or two, we could work on some throws. If a girl could throw me, odds are she could take care of herself in most situations.

My head was down as I entered the studio. I didn't register someone standing in the corner of the room.

"You're late," a voice rang out behind me.

Chapter 2 - Wannabees

"Here's his card and contact information. He'll meet you tomorrow at 6:30. You know where it is?"

I looked down at the business card in my hand. Emmett McCarty. A time and gym name had been written on the back.

"Yes, I know where it is."

"He'll take good care of you Rose. Emmett is a great guy. I'd trust him with my life, even if he weren't family."

"What did you tell him?"

Jasper looked down sheepishly.

"What did you tell him, Jasper?" I'd agreed to a few self defense classes reluctantly. If it were anyone else, I wouldn't have given in. But I'd learned quickly that Jasper was just as stubborn as I was.

"Just that you had someone messing with you, and it might be good for you to learn how to throw a punch."

I felt my shoulders relax. It shouldn't matter what Emmett knew. I didn't know him; he didn't know me.

But for some reason, I found that I cared what an absolute stranger thought.

"You can trust him, Rose. He's not going to jerk you around. He did a bunch of martial arts stuff when we were little, if anyone knows his shit, it's Em."

"Thank you, Jasper." I broke off, not quite sure what to say next.

"Don't sweat it. Just take care of yourself, okay?"

I nodded and tipped my head at the door.

"You have other things to take care of. Go get your girl."

He smiled and was off in a flash. He really did have it bad. It made me wonder if I could ever find someone like that. After years of watching my close friends meet 'that guy,' I was growing more and more cynical about my chance of ever meeting Mr. Right.

Most of the men I met were Mr. Right Now, yet quickly evolved into Mr. Go Away Please.

I try to joke about it, yet in reality, my string of luck with guys was beyond atrocious. If I am honest with myself, it's my own fault. Growing up I was a princess. Everyone wanted me; either to be my friend or to date me. I was the homecoming queen, head cheerleader, and class president all rolled into one pretty little package tied with a big satin bow.

Unfortunately, with that pretty little package came an ego the size of North America.

Yet a strange thing happened as I got older. I changed, I evolved. Whether through fate or luck, I actually became a good person. Someone of above average intellect and more than her share of opportunity. But while I evolved, the caliber of people around me didn't. I thought I associated with the right types; I went to an Ivy League School, I had an excellent job.

Instead of changing, they just wanted more. Everyone had an angle; everyone expected something.

It made me think of a movie I'd seen not too long ago. The male lead claimed to read minds, and to prove his point, looked around the room listing the thoughts of the people at hand. It went something like Money, sex, money, sex, money, cat.

Ironically, it wasn't too far off the mark. Although I'm allergic to cats.

I'd found myself growing more and more cynical as I got older. I expected things to get better, but they only got worse. Men saw the face and body and minimized my brain. Women saw my face and body and assumed I was a bitch. To the former, I was a prize to be won. To the latter, I was either competition or bait.

Neither was an appealing answer.

So I put up a façade and soldiered through life. My group of real friends was small and intimate. Bella, Alice, Kate, and Tanya. Jasper by association. It didn't lead to

much diversity. Every once in a while, I'd toss my line in the dating pool, hoping things would change. It only got worse.

Which is the quandary I am in now. I'd gone on three dates with a friend of a friend from work. They'd started out nice enough. Dinner and then different halfway original things. A museum. The symphony. Last night had been a neat little wine bar with a jazz quartet.

Everything had gone well. Until we said goodnight.

Apparently there is an unspoken rule that after so many dates, certain favors or efforts were expected in return. Suddenly a simple kiss wouldn't suffice.

And so when I stepped away, he jerked me back. I reacted, yelling at him to get his hands off me. Fortunately one of my roommates opened the door to see what was going on, preventing anything more from happening.

That's how Jasper found out. I got a lecture from him on stupid risks and being able to take care of myself. I told him I was perfectly capable of handling a drunk handsy groper. And in two seconds he had me pinned up against a wall.

"You are too cynical to be so naive, Rose. A guy could come at you at any time, and you need to be able to take care of yourself. How would you get yourself out of this? If a guy had pinned you like this, what would you do? Do you honestly think you could get away?"

I tried to knee him in the nuts. He deserved it after that little stunt. But he'd kept his body angled. With my wrists pinned, I didn't stand a chance.

He released me, and immediately started up on my need to learn how to protect myself.

"My cousin took martial arts for years. He actually taught a women's self defense course in college. He can teach you how to protect yourself."

"You are being a drama queen, Jasper."

"Many things I've been called, but never a queen. Come on, Rose. Humor me. You know it would kill everyone if anything happened to you."

That's how I ended up in the small fitness studio waiting for Emmett McCarty.

I'd caught him watching me on our Wednesday nights out. But unlike all the others, he never approached. He stayed on the periphery, watching everything. The casual grace of someone truly comfortable in his skin. People passed him by in two thousand dollar suits, yet they didn't exude the style that he had in his faded jeans and well fitted shirt. He carried himself like old money. Style, elegance, but total lack of arrogance.

Early on, I expected him to hit on me. Everyone else did, why would he be any different? He'd started up a conversation when we first met, and I'd escaped mortified after being an absolute bitch to him. It felt like I was a bitch to everyone these days.

But then again, most people deserved it.

"Sorry..." Emmett responded sheepishly to my immediate attack. He was late, but I didn't have to come off like such a bitch. He didn't deserve it. "Forgot to put it on my calendar."

I watched him drop his bag in the corner, then turn to face me.

"So you need self defense lessons, eh? Your tongue doesn't knock 'em flat at twenty feet?"

His sarcastic response caught me off guard. No one ever spoke to me that way.

Emmett pulled an arm across his chest, pushing against the back of his forearm with his free hand. I'd noticed before how large he was, but I'd never seen him in a short sleeved shirt. The muscles were clearly defined. No fat, no soft. Just muscle and sinew.

He looked like he could snap me in two.

"Slim said you needed the basics on self defense. Someone been giving you grief?"

The lilt to his words was fascinating. The soft vowels and smoothing of syllables were such a marked contrast to the nasally o's and hard syncopation of accents in the northeast. I suddenly had the appreciation of the saying 'I could listen to him read the phone book.'

But his reference had me confused, and I wasn't sure what he meant.

"I'm sorry, Slim?"

He smiled at my confusion. Or should I say with my confusion, for it wasn't condescending. A small laugh accompanied his smile, revealing a pair of perfect dimples. They were incredibly deep, and gave him a youthful, almost childlike air.

I'd never seen him smile before. You don't forget a smile like that, even if it's just in passing.

"Sorry. Slim is Jasper. The family started calling him that when he was little. It just stuck."

"Did he have a name for you?"

I don't know why I felt the need to draw him out, to ask more. Polite conversation, I corrected myself. I am not digging out of curiosity. I am simply being polite. I was raised with manners, I should use them.

Emmett's smile grew a bit, and I could just for a second imagine what he looked like as a little boy.

"He tried to call me oaf once. We were seven. He never did it again."

"Did you hit him?" I gasped, immediately assuming the worst.

"No. I told his mom. She was a scary woman." Emmett held a hand up, palm out in front of him. "I want to see how scary you can be. Take a swing."

The abrupt shift in conversation caught me off guard, and I wasn't sure exactly how to respond.

"Come on, Blondie. Throw a punch. Let's see what you've got."

His hand was extended in front of me, an easy target. His smile had faded a tiny bit, tempered by a look that said it all.

He thought I was weak.

He thought I wouldn't do it.

He thought I would cry.

I could feel the anger welling up inside of me. Who did this guy think he was, and how dare he act like he knew me. My hand instinctively curled into a fist, itching to hit him.

Letting my arm fly, I planted my fist in the center of his palm as hard as I could.

Two things happened.

First, his hand didn't move. Not a fraction of an inch.

Second, it hurt like hell.

"Son of a bitch!" I squealed, immediately pulling my hand back to my chest for protection. "Are you made of lead?"

Emmett reached out, gently grabbing my wrist.

"Let me see."

"No!"

"Rose, let me see, please."

It was the please that did it. So few people ever used it around me, and when they did, they were never sincere. I let my arm fall away from my body. He turned my hand over so that it could rest in his large palm, and probed at my fingers with his free hand.

I hissed in pain as he pushed on my thumb.

"When you hit me, where was your thumb?"

"On my hand?" The sarcastic comments were too easy to dish out. But I immediately regretted it. "I don't know..."

Emmett held up his free hand, curling a fist.

"Was it like this?"

I studied his balled up hand, looking at the placement of the fingers, the alignment of the wrist.

"I think so."

He laughed and let go of my hand.

"Rule number one. If you are going to throw a punch, don't tuck your thumb inside. You're lucky you didn't break it."

I could feel the blood rush to my face in embarrassment.

"Don't get mad. Learn from it. Figure out your mistake, adjust, and don't do it again. Now come on, I am going to teach you how to throw a punch."

We spent the next hour working with a heavy bag Emmett pulled out from a corner in the studio. He taught me how to stand, to balance so that I put my weight behind my punch as I exploded forward from my shoulder. I began to understand the physics of contact, how to drive the maximum impact without hurting myself.

"Not bad. You are getting it," Emmett encouraged me as I went.

By 7:30 I was a sweaty, grimy, gross mess.

He hadn't even broken a sweat.

"I think you are good for tonight. You should stop on your way home and buy a couple of cups of crushed ice. You'll need that and a few Advil. You'll probably be pretty sore tomorrow."

My confused frown made Emmett laugh.

"For your hand, Rose. Vending machine ice is broken up in smaller chunks than the stuff you have at home, and can mold around the shape of your hand better." He walked over to retrieve his bag from the corner where he'd dropped it. "I'm out of town this weekend, but I can give you some more lessons next week if you'd like."

His invitation for another session put me immediately on guard. What would his expectation be? Did he have an ulterior motive?

As if sensing my hesitation, Emmett shook his head and turned for the door.

"I'm here pretty much every week night from 6:30 to 8. You want to learn, come by. If not, I won't look for you."

With that, he left me in that little stuffy studio, sweaty, confused, and very alone.

Chapter 3 – Communication & Reconnaissance

Crap.

Shit.

What the hell?

Fuck.

Being curious was one thing.

Watching her on Wednesday nights? It was a bit stalkerish, but harmless.

But of all the women in this world, why did she have to be the one Jasper wanted me to help?

The minute I cleared the gym, I dialed Jasper's number.

He answered on the fourth ring.

"Slim, what the fuck? Rose Hale? Come on!"

He was completely taken aback by my attack.

"Why are you surprised? I told you it was her. Right before I told you what happened and why she needed some help. What is your deal?"

I thought back to our conversation at the bar. I'd been watching Rose as Jasper made his pitch. And I'd totally tuned out the first half of what he said. He had been talking about her, and I didn't have a damn clue.

"Did you seriously not know who you were helping?" The amusement was apparent in his voice.

"Yeah," I was hesitant to admit it. I knew how pissed off he got when people didn't listen to him.

"But you are going to help her, aren't you?"

"That's kind of a lame question, considering that I just spent an hour teaching her how to throw a punch. She was actually doing pretty well by the end. Not sure how she felt about the sweat though."

Jasper broke out into full on belly laughs at the mental image. "Oh man, you have to take a picture of that next time. I'd pay money. No, scratch that, I'd make money!"

He was in an abnormally talkative mood tonight. I could tell by the way he kept drawing the conversation out. So I decided to take a calculated risk and push for more information.

"So what's her deal, Slim? I tried being nice to her when we first met, but she was a total bitch. I jokingly nicknamed her the Queen Bee."

"Ah yes, the mystique that is Rosalie Hale. I've noticed you watching, Em. You weren't as subtle as you thought. And don't let the exterior fool you. She's not a bitch. Anything but."

"Somehow I doubt that. I've seen her in action. She leaves quite the path of destruction."

"What is that old adage, kill or be killed? Don't judge her until you know her man, there is depth there like you'd never imagine."

"I'm sorry, but when I think of beautiful blondes, depth makes me think of that joke 'how do you drown a blonde....'" He didn't reply so I continued. "Glue a mirror to the bottom of a pool. But you say she has depth, so I'll humor you and ask what the deal is with the act?"

I wanted to ask him why she felt the need to be such a bitch to people, but that was harsh, even between the two of us.

"Dude, look at her? If she were sweetness and light, people would tear her apart." He paused, and I could hear the clink of ice in a glass as he took a drink of something. "Everyone is always playing an angle with her. Very few people take the time to get to know what's underneath. It's a defense mechanism. You know how pissed you get when people assume things based on how you look? Imagine being a chick and having to deal with that."

"Is that why you asked me to help her out?"

Jasper snorted. "You are so obtuse. I told you why. You just weren't listening to me. Or not hearing, one of the two. Now I'm late and you are no wiser. Momma should have let me stick with Oaf as a nickname for you."

"Fuck you, Slim."

"Fuck you back, Oaf."

He was still laughing when he hung up.

The rest of my weekend was spent in a semi fog. My brother and his wife had bought a new house, and I'd promised I would help them move. The physical labor was good for channeling the frustration that had been on slow simmer since Thursday, but it did little to distract my over active imagination.

Would she come back to the gym?

Did she realize that I wasn't like everyone else? That I understood what it was like to be judged based on appearance? And to actually have more going on under the surface than anyone would expect?

Would she talk to me the next time we saw each other out socially? Or would it be the same old?

Why the hell couldn't I stop thinking about her?

I could feel myself growing more and more agitated as the week went on. For the first time in years, I found myself toying with going for a sure thing, just to get Rose Hale out of my mind.

But I knew that going out with someone else to try and forget would only make things worse. I would end up pissed off at myself for being an ass and comparing a woman I had no interest in to a woman that fascinated me. It was a recipe for disaster, heart fail, and frustration.

So I sucked it up for the rest of the weekend, snapping at anyone that happened to cross me. It wasn't my nature, and at one point my brother asked what the fuck my deal was. He was right. I was Mr. Happy Go Lucky. Emmett McCarty didn't do cranky.

Well, normally.

When I got home on Sunday night, I called Jasper.

"Slim, I can't stop thinking about her."

"Tell me something new. Just because you are admitting it to yourself doesn't mean the rest of us haven't seen it for ages."

I let his comment slide, choosing instead to focus on the end game.

"So what do I do? She won't give me the time of day."

"Be you, Em. Not the jaded guy who isn't happy with anything. Be the way you are around me. Make jokes. Be happy. If you can do that, maybe she'll do the same."

I had to laugh at his observations. "You are such a chick."

"Don't criticize the logic man. I'm the one that has a girl...where are you?"

"Fuck you, Slim."

"Fuck you too, Em."

Monday couldn't have gone any slower. I was distracted through meetings. My attention was focused on one thing. My watch.

The minute hand taunted me. At one point I had this bizarre mental image of an animated minute hand, stick its tongue out at me and my emo behavior. I was turning into a fucking girl.

6:00 on the nose I was at the gym, dressed and ready to go. I needed to get some energy out before she showed up.

If she showed up, I reminded myself. This isn't a sure thing. She is not a sure thing. And if she shows up, you better get down on your knees and thank your lucky stars.

Forty five minutes later, I'd given up hope and was well into a run when I heard Mike shout out at me.

"Yo, McCarty!"

"What?"

"Your girl is here. She went back to the studio."

I hit stop on the treadmill, and wiped my face on my shoulder.

She was actually here. I was gross and sweaty. God damnit. What a way to make an impression.

Taking one more cursory swipe of my face with my shirt, I made my way back to the studio.

She was already at work, throwing punches at the bag. They weren't half bad.

"You've been practicing?"

She looked back at me over her shoulder and actually smiled. A real smile, not a fake one.

And she was absolutely breathtaking.

"A little. Didn't want you to feel like you were wasting your time."

As if I could ever feel like I was wasting my time with her. I might not get anything out of it, but I was sure as hell going to enjoy every minute.

"Okay, you can throw a punch. But can you block one?"

Rose dropped her hands and turned to face me.

"Why would I need to know how to block a punch? No one is ever going to take a swing at me."

I couldn't help but laugh at her naiveté.

"You never know. Better to be prepared than caught off guard."

She sighed and put her hands on her hips. "Fine. Teach me how to block a punch."

"You aren't going to block anything standing like that."

She sighed in exasperation, dropping her hands to her side.

"Better?"

Before she could prepare, I brought my arm up in a wide arc, stopping just short as she pulled hers up in protection.

"Not bad. The motion was good. But instead of stopping, keep going. You might have protected your head, but I would have landed a punch somewhere. If you hadn't stopped you would have most likely pushed me off. Better to get it in the shoulder than the torso or noggin."

She frowned at me, a small indentation forming between her eyebrows. She didn't like not being right.

"That wasn't fair."

"What, were you waiting for me to announce I was going to hit you? It doesn't work that way. If someone is going to come at you, you aren't going to get an invitation or a declaration first."

Before she could respond, I swung with the other arm. She was quick, bringing her arm up to parry my fist away.

"Good!"

She straightened up, smiling. "I did it! I..."

My arm was back in motion as she celebrated. I wanted to keep pushing her, making her think. She didn't register my open hand coming at a different trajectory and was too late to block it. Unfortunately for both of us, I also didn't have the ability to flat out stop. I caught her across her cheek, rocking her backwards.

She landed flat on her butt, her legs splayed out in front of her like a rag doll. One hand braced against the floor, the other held her cheek where I had hit her.

I had hit her.

Oh shit.

Looking up at me, eyes wide, I could see the rage boiling. She was pissed. Livid. Furious.

At first I felt horrible. I'd hit a woman. I don't hit women. It was against every fiber of my being. My upbringing. If my mom knew, she'd kick me into next century.

My response was involuntary. My shock, my lame internal dialogue, her expression, the whole situation...I couldn't help it.

I started laughing.

Full out, doubled over, gasping for air laughing.

She was never going to talk to me again, but I couldn't help it. The whole thing was so god damn funny.

I gasped a breath and stood, holding my hand out to her.

"I'm sorry!" I choked out the words, still trying to contain my laughter. "It's just that you looked so...and I felt so..."

I couldn't help but start laughing again. The whole situation was too surreal not to.

While I laughed, she sat there, cradling her cheek, eyes wide in shock. I expected her to yell at me, to stalk out, to blow up.

But she never moved.

When I could finally gasp a breath, I held my hand out to her in offering.

"Come on, let's go get some peas on that before you get a shiner."

Chapter 4 – Crushes & the Proper Use of Fruit

I'd arrived at the gym a bit early.

An hour early.

I couldn't stay away. Part of me was curious. Who was this guy?

Another part of me was hesitant. He was a guy. It was only a matter of time before he became typical. A stupid comment, an accidental brush up against my breast, the request for dinner. Or something more.

This allowed me to keep my mind away from the last part.

I was attracted to him.

Emmett McCarty wasn't the type of guy I normally went for. I liked tall, which he was, but I tended to go for lanky. Like his cousin Jasper. If I was going to date a football player, I went for the wide receiver or the quarterback. Not a linebacker or tight end.

But there was something so disarming about him. He was incredibly intimidating. Not just his size, but the way he carried himself. Like he knew exactly what he was doing, and had zero concerns about accomplishing what he set out to do.

And then he would smile, and everything else seemed to just fade away. You could literally feel the weight of the world lift from your soul under the brilliance of that grin. His smile relaxed you, made you feel safe. Made you feel happy.

I had two roommates in college with very distinct philosophies on men.

Heidi would have called him a beautiful soul. Someone who could make you think, maybe even change your perspective on the world.

Giana would have called him a beautiful body. The kind of man who knew what he had, and had no compunction in using it to get what he wanted. All the better if what he wanted was you.

Both would have been right where Emmett McCarty was concerned.

It was scary to think of both things resident in one person. So I chose to focus on the mystery and minimize the expectation. It was too easy to be disappointed by men. Why would Emmett McCarty be any different?

There was a small café across the street from the gym, which provided an excellent vantage point. I settled in at a table by the window with a cup of iced coffee and the newspaper. And I had to laugh at myself. Me, of all people, waiting outside a gym to catch a glimpse of a guy.

What had happened to me?

At six o'clock sharp, I saw him walk into the building. I almost missed him. I'd been on the lookout for a guy in shorts and a t shirt, or in jeans. It was all I'd ever seen him in.

I never stopped to think of him as a professional. Which is why I almost overlooked the guy with the slicked back hair and the khaki summer weight suit. His tie was unknotted and hung limply from the collar of a crisp white shirt. A black gym bag draped casually over one shoulder. He stopped at the door, holding it open for two elderly women outfitted in gaudy pink velour sweat suits.

And damn it, that third part came roaring back full force. Beautiful soul. Really beautiful body.

I almost backed out right there. He didn't know I'd come. I hadn't committed to anything. I could turn around and go home now. No one would be any wiser.

Two iced coffees and almost an hour later, I still sat in the same café.

I needed to know. This curiosity would kill me. I threw away my drink and left the paper on the table for someone else. I could have returned it to the front counter, asking them to pass it on to another customer in an eco friendly gesture, but I was in too much of a hurry to get across the street.

The guy at the front desk greeted me and directed me back to the studio we'd used before. Just as I cleared the entryway I heard him shout "Yo, McCarty."

I picked up the pace, not wanting to be standing there waiting for him. Keys on the bench, fists at the bag. Get the energy out. Focus.

When he came in, he teased me, something about practicing. I only half paid attention to what he said. I was too tense, too keyed up.

He wanted to teach me how to block a punch. I couldn't see ever needing it, but I humored him. His first attempt caught me off guard, and I reacted, bringing my arm up to cover my face.

Emmett corrected me, and took another swing. His second attempt didn't land.

I'd done it. I'd stopped him!

Too busy celebrating; I wasn't prepared for Emmett to come at me again. He tried to stop, but it was too late. His open hand caught me right under my eye, my head rocking back in reaction. It knocked me off balance, and I fell flat. A hand shot up instinctively to protect my cheek.

Once the shock had registered, I looked up, ready to rip him a new one.

The expression on his face was one of pure mortification. It was apparent he felt horrible about hitting me. I bit back a retort, knowing that he hadn't meant to hurt me. It was an accident.

But then he started laughing. Full out, hysterical laughter.

I stared at him, incredulous. He hit me, and he was laughing?

He gasped out an apology, holding his hand out to me, saying something about vegetables that made no sense.

I allowed him to pull me to my feet. He immediately let go and placed his hand in the small of my back to guide me towards the front of the gym.

"Hey Mike, we have a wounded soldier. Any frozen peas back there?"

"No, someone used the last bag this morning. There are bags of frozen fruit though. Jessica has been experimenting with different smoothie recipes."

Emmett guided me back into a small alcove. There was a counter, blenders, a sink, and refrigerator.

"Jessica is Mike's partner. She started up a juice bar a few months ago. She makes god awful things like pea and coriander smoothies with wheat grass. Most of the people around here use the frozen vegetables to ice down injuries. It 's easier on the skin than actual ice."

I felt his hands around my waist. He picked me up with minimal effort, setting me on the counter. Before I could react or chastise him for touching me without my permission, he'd withdrawn to the refrigerator.

"Okay...if you were a fruit smoothie, what would you be?" He called out to me. "Looks like the options are blueberry, papaya, or strawberry banana."

"Umm, blueberry?" I responded, not sure where he was going.

"Good choice. They are smaller and will form to your face better."

Emmett held up a pint sized Ziploc bag full of frozen berries.

"The same size as pees, but they look and taste a heck of a lot better."

He extended his arm, placing the Ziploc bag against my cheek. The cold against my sensitive flesh hurt, and I flinched in reaction.

"God, I am so sorry. I am such an oaf sometimes." He stopped short, flashing another one of those smiles. "And please don't tell Slim I said that. He'll never let me live it down."

My hand went instinctively to the bag of frozen fruit, bumping his arm as he withdrew.

"It's okay. It was an accident."

Emmett leaned back against the counter opposite me, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I still feel lousy about it. I'm really sorry."

"Emmett, it's not a big deal. I had a brother growing up. We rough housed. It's not like I've never gotten hurt before."

"Yeah, but my mom raised me better than that. Even if it was an accident, if she knew she'd kick my ass." He paused, the smile growing. "Although, from your perspective, it would probably be funny, because she is all of one hundred and ten pounds soaking wet."

I couldn't help but laugh at the image.

"Would she hit you over the head with a rolling pin?"

Emmett threw back his head, laughing. "No, worse. I grew up in a big family. You screw up, you had to do all the chores yourself. Imagine peeling potatoes for a family of ten."

"That's where the arm muscles came from." It was out before I could catch myself. Fortunately my cheeks were already red from the exertion and hit. Hopefully it wouldn't show.

"If the potatoes didn't, then hauling the laundry up from the basement did. As soon as I could afford it, I started sending all my laundry out. It was hard to get over someone washing my boxers, but knowing that I'd never have to lug a basket up two flights of steps again was more than enough to cancel that out."

The ease at which he spoke about his family and his life was disarming. I was used to people putting on airs, trying to make themselves into something more than what they were. He was the exact opposite of that.

"What do you do? Professionally, that is?"

"Architect. I just started working on the City Hospital project."

It was my turn to laugh. "Get out! I love that place!"

"You know it?" His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"So much so I put a deposit down on one of the first units available. It will be my first piece of personal property. I love the architecture and the history behind it. I can't believe they managed to salvage it. I saw some of the assessment photos. It was a mess. I hope those bastards tore their hands up trying to get the insulation of that copper wire."

I caught Emmett's brows furrow.

"What?"

"The copper wire comment." He hesitated, looking away. "Most women wouldn't know copper wire was insulated."

"I grew up around boys. Other girls played Barbies. I built stuff."

There was an awkward silence.

"You know, I think I owe you an apology," Emmett started out. "I assumed that you would be a bitch. I judged you based on what I saw and not anything quantifiable. I'm sorry for that."

His admission caught me off guard.

"If someone told me a week ago that Rose Hale knew what insulated copper wire was, I would have laughed at them and told them to keep sniffing glue."

I started to smile, but the motion hurt.

Emmett noticed, and winced.

"I really am sorry about that. I hope it doesn't bruise."

"If it does, I'll just cover it up. That's why there is makeup."

He nodded and smiled again.

"I am going to head out. I've got some work to do tonight. Thanks for not being mad and for being such a good sport."

He hesitated for a moment, as if he wanted to say something else. Then smiled and left the alcove.

I wanted to run after him and ask him not to leave. He didn't say anything about another lesson. Was this it? I didn't have any other reason to see him. What if he didn't show up with Jasper for his usual Wednesday night?

The debate raged in my mind about what to do. I'd never had to pursue a guy. I had no clue what to do.

I sat debating for a few more minutes, trying to galvanize my courage.

Then I tossed the bag of blueberries in the trash. I doubted anyone would want soggy blueberries that had been smashed against my cheek. I ran back to the studio to grab my wallet and keys; then I turned and ran back to the front of the gym.

"Did he leave yet?" I demanded of the blonde man at the front desk.

"I'm sorry?"

"Emmett. Did he leave yet?"

The blonde man smiled knowingly.

"Just walked out. If you are fast, you might be able too..."

I didn't hear the rest of what the blonde said. I was out the door, chasing after Emmett McCarty.

Chapter 5 – Electrical Conductivity

It was a total rookie move.

We were standing there talking, and then she went and threw me for a total loop.

There aren't many things that can surprise me anymore. But when she said she'd already put down a deposit on a space in the building I've been working on, followed by the copper wire comment, I was toast.

This woman was perfect. And totally at odds with everything I'd presumed to know about her. What'd Jasper said? There was a depth there like I could never imagine?

Well, if depth was the sucker punch to the jaw, then her vulnerability was the shot in the stomach that had me doubled over. It's easier to take a man down when he's thrown off balance. And she did that in spades.

So I did what any normal guy would do. I panicked. I used work as an excuse and bolted.

I could try and chalk it up to my embarrassment and mortification over hitting her, as well as my ensuing fit of hysterical nervous laughter. Or my admission that I'd thought she was a raging bitch. I could happily hide behind any of those reasons as I tucked tail and ran.

I claimed my bag from the locker room. I tossed on my suit jacket over my t-shirt so it wouldn't get wrinkled, grabbed my keys out of the front pocket, and beat a path for the front door. A cursory wave in Mike's direction kept me from trying to catch a glimpse into that little alcove.

She might not even be there anymore.

I'd parked my Jeep in a lot just down the street. I was just about to make the turn into the lot, when I heard someone shout out my name.

Pausing, I glanced back over my shoulder to see Rose Hale running my way.

Not jogging. Not walking fast. Running.

She stopped short of me. Opened her mouth, and then shut it. A look of confusion darting across her face.

I stood, rooted to the spot. Waiting for her to speak.

"Did you know that the cells in blueberries can be used to generate electricity?"

I frowned, taken totally of guard by her statement. What the hell was she talking about?

"They work better than any other fruit or vegetable because of their color. You would think it would be citrus because of the acid, but it all came down to appearance and what was going on underneath the surface. Apparently the color magnifies the process of photosynthesis. Something to do with the cellular structure. So while the outside is a pretty dark purple, the inside is what really packs the punch."

Rose hesitated, glancing down at the ground.

"And if the cool thing about it, if you use the blueberry compound with copper wire, you can make your own solar panels."

I couldn't help but smile.

"Constant renewable energy thanks to pretty purple fruit and electrical wiring. I like that idea."

She glanced up at me, her cheeks tinged with the slightest touch of pink. She'd taken a leap of faith and was waiting for me to reciprocate.

I racked my brain, trying to think of the one thing that could meet her expectations, prove to her that this was different. I was different.

We could be different.

And then it hit me.

"I have a bunch of photos of the interior of the hospital on my laptop. It's in my car. Do you want to see it?"

Her look of apprehension was slowly replaced by one of enthusiasm as she nodded.

As we slowly walked towards the parking lot I told her the history of the building, and some of the efforts we'd taken to maintain some of the original details. In turn, she peppered me with questions about the complexities of the rehab.

We stood in the parking lot for two hours, my laptop open on the hood of her car. I showed her the photos taken at the point the company took on the project. I pulled up original pictures of the hospital in the day. I even let her look at some of the original concepts that had been put forth to the design committee.

It felt like we could've kept going like that for hours. But the battery indicator on my laptop started to flash orange. Ten minutes of juice left.

We'd both tuned out how much time we'd spent talking, and I was surprised to realize it was totally dark now. We'd stood in the parking lot talking for over two hours, and it had flown by like minutes.

The natural, logical thing was to say goodnight and go home. But I didn't want to leave. And I'd be damned if I knew exactly what to do or say next.

As I powered down my laptop, I had a fit of inspiration. Go out on a limb, Emmett. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Hey, Rose..." I could feel the nerves prick at my chest as my heart rate increased. This was ridiculous...I was a grown man, not a fourteen year old boy asking out the homecoming queen.

"Yeah?" She looked up at me, her eyes wide.

I had her undivided attention.

That and that alone gave me the courage to dive in, head first.

"I have to do some stuff on site tomorrow. Do you want a tour of your new home? I can take you up on the scaffolding; show you what they are doing to maintain some of the old details..."

The corners of her mouth started to inch up in an amused smile.

"Really?"

I suddenly felt childish. I'm sure she had guys offering to take her to all sorts of unique places and expensive restaurants. What did I do? Offer to drag her around a construction site.

But before I could rescind my offer, she surprised me.

"I'd love to. I've always wanted to see the inside...well, before it's complete that is."

She hesitated for a moment before stepping forward.

"I have your card. I'll call you tomorrow and we can figure out a time."

I was about to respond to her, but she beat me to the punch. She took one more step forward and pushed up on tiptoe.

And kissed me.

It wasn't the Bull Durham 'long slow deep kiss.' It was fast and relatively innocent. Her lips were ridiculously soft. I could come up with all kinds of clichéd, cheesy things to compare it to. None of it would have done her justice.

All I could think was that Rose Hale had just kissed me.

She stepped back, her cheeks a darker red now.

"I had to test my theory." She glanced down, unable to meet my eyes. "I think our conductivity experiment worked."

Before I could say a word, she climbed in her car and started the engine. The electric window slid down, and she gave me a brilliant smile.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Blueberry Boy!"

She pulled away, and I watched the red of her tail lights whip around the corner into the darkness.

"Have a nice night, Live Wire." I murmured under my breath. Live wire was an understatement.

And then I found myself laughing. If I was a blueberry, she was most definitely copper wire. The insulation, the cold exterior hid more electricity and energy than any one person should have.

My drive home was uneventful, having missed all the normal rush hour traffic. I showered and settled in on the couch with a makeshift dinner of an apple and some cheddar cheese to catch up on work.

If I was going to spend time on site, I needed to get caught up with all the things I'd been too distracted to work on today. I opened my email, and began to weed through the backlog. Project emails were replied to or flagged for follow up. Administrative emails were read and deleted.

I was plowing through things at a good clip when one subject line caught me off guard.

Renewable Energy.

My mind immediately flashed to Rose. Great, they probably wanted to make the building green, or greener. I'd have a constant reminder at work of her.

As if I needed one.

But the email wasn't from someone at work. And it wasn't a handle I recognized.

Out of curiosity, I clicked on it to open the document.

Embedded in the message was a link; using blueberries to drive solar panels. Beneath it was a short note from Rose.

Blueberry Boy;

Can we have dinner before the tour? I think I have some more conductivity concepts I'd like to test.

Rose

I leaned back against the couch, smiling. She never did what I thought she would. Would she always surprise me like this?

Clever, witty responses are usually not an issue for me. They come naturally. But I was stumped as to how to respond this time. Everything felt trite or sappy, and I sure as hell didn't want to screw this one up.

After a few minutes of over analyzing, I gave up and typed out exactly what was on my mind and hit send.

I'd like nothing more. Can't wait to see you, Live Wire.

Em

And it was true.

The next night, we did have dinner. It was takeout pizza eaten off the hood of my jeep in front of the hospital. Then I led her through the building, standing back as she climbed up scaffolding like a pro to explore. Her knowledge of all things electrical or mechanical was astounding, as was her joy with anything obscure. She could have spent an hour playing with the old dumbwaiter, and even longer examining the fixtures that we'd managed to salvage.

As we started to descend the stairs from the second floor, she paused, a conflicted look on her face.

"What's wrong?" Things had been going so well, I hated to think that it was turning south now.

"I want to do something, but you have to promise not to laugh at me." She wouldn't meet my eye, and there was a flash of that insecure little girl again.

I thought we were long over that those types of concerns by now, but I was beginning to appreciate the intricacies that were Rose Hale. There wasn't just one wall to break down, but multiple. It would take time and patience, and not all of them would be easy. But the simple fact that she was opening up spoke volumes.

"Okay. I promise." I stuffed my hands in my pockets, working to keep my face open and accepting.

She ran her hand over the smooth lacquered oak banister. It was one of the first things to be refurbished. The flying staircase had been amazing in the day, and lent an otherworldly feel to what would ultimately be the grand entry to the property.

"I've always wanted to slide down a banister. Do you think it will support me?"

It was hard not to laugh at how young she sounded. And along with the laughter, it was hard not to smile too. She was putting faith in me by making an admission like that.

"It should. It held me. But I do have to warn you," I paused for dramatic effect. "It's pretty damn fast."

She glanced up, her smile returning as she realized I was serious.

"I guess that means you'd better be there to catch me at the end, shouldn't you?"

I wanted to tell her I'd always be there to catch her, but it didn't seem appropriate.

"Why, so you can knock me on my ass?"

Rose grinned back at me. "Turnabout is fair play."

"Fine. Give me two minutes."

I ran down the steps, positioning myself about a foot off the newel post.

"Okay Live Wire, hit me with your best shot."

She climbed up onto the banister, her feet crossed at the ankles over the oak rail. Her arms hugging the wood behind her. Most men would have found the whole thing strangely bizarre.

But to me, there wasn't a more beautiful sight to behold.

"Ready or not, here I come!"

She released her grip and came streaking down the railing, laughter trailing in her wake.

The staircase started out steep, curved, then leveled off the last twenty feet or so. The bend was enough to slow you down if you were prepared, but Rose didn't compensate and came whipping around the corner. She hit the newel post and sailed directly into me.

My arms went up instinctively to catch her, but the velocity was too much, and it knocked me flat with an 'ungh.'

As I sat up, she was laughing hysterically.

Just like I'd done the night before.

"Oh my god that was fun. I'm fighting the urge to shout let's do it again!"

"Please, no, I don't know if my body can take it."

She shifted in my lap, grinning up at me, her eyes bright.

"I told you I'd knock you on your ass."

"Rose, you did that a long time ago. You just don't realize it."

Her smile faded a bit, and I thought I might have upset her.

"I'm sorry if I wasn't very nice to you," she started quietly. "I made a snap judgment. I was wrong."

"It happens to the best of us, remember?"

Her hand found its way to my cheek, and she ran the back of her knuckles along my jaw.

"You deserve better than that."

"I just want one thing, Rose."

The uncertainty in her eyes was absolutely heartbreaking.

"What would that be?"

"I want to make you laugh like that everyday. If I do nothing else for the rest of my life, I think I could die a happy man."

She leaned in, and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

"I'd like that too."

Epilogue

"Needless to say, that left one hell of a mark."

The crowd roared as Jasper wrapped up his story.

"I still owe you for that one, you know," I whispered in Emmett's ear.

"Like you haven't gotten me back in spades about a thousand times." He whispered back, smiling at me innocently.

"That's your perspective Mr. McCarty."

"Perspective is everything, Mrs. McCarty."

"So says the architect," I teased. Emmett grabbed my hand, pulling it to his lips to brush a kiss over the back of my knuckles. We'd been together for two years now, and he could still give me butterflies by doing that.

"So let's raise our glasses to Emmett and Rose." Jasper called, his flute extended. "It took physical violence to get you two stubborn fools together; here's hoping your married life is much more sedate, but always full of electricity."

There were choruses of "hear hear" as people sipped from their champagne flutes.

"That wasn't too bad," Emmett murmured before he took a sip. "I've heard him dish out worse."

"You spoke to soon," I interjected as Jasper dashed back to grab the microphone from the band leader.

"I almost forgot. Our grandfather was a very wise man. He taught us the importance of family and traditions. He also had a ton of interesting sayings. One of which I think is incredibly appropriate for today. So everyone hoist your glasses one more time. You don't want to miss this one."

He paused for dramatic effect.

"If Gramps were here, I have a feeling he would say something like this. Emmett and Rose...may your sins be revisited on you by your children tenfold."

The room erupted into laughter.

Emmett blew out a long breath. "We're screwed aren't we?"

"We may be. But I think it's a safe bet to say we'll laugh a lot and never be bored."

Emmett grinned back at me, "Not at all, Rosalie McCarty. Not at all."