

Summary: When Alex Graham bats a cricket ball into Rachel Shaw's stomach, neither of them are expecting to fall in love. But as he loses the fight to resist his feelings for her, Rachel is getting closer to the secret that threatens not just their love, but their very lives.

Chapter 1 – Rachel

Rachel sat on a bench outside the clinic and watched a caterpillar crawling towards a fork in a tree branch. If it went left, she would go to the appointment. If it went right, she would cancel it.

She crossed her fingers as it got closer. A couple of inches before the fork, the caterpillar veered over the edge of the branch and onto a leaf beneath it.

“Well, you're no help,” Rachel muttered. A man walking past gave her a strange look, and she pretended not to notice.

The clinic loomed behind her. It was a modern building with an opaque glass façade promising discretion and a manicured garden that looked as expensive to maintain as their prices suggested.

Rachel stared steadfastly at the marina in front of her.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, announcing a text message. If the message was from Ally, she would go to the appointment. If it was Sam, she'd cancel it. Unless her cat had grown opposable thumbs, it could only be from one of her two best friends. Constance, her foster mother, had only grudgingly accepted cordless landline phones and refused even to discuss getting a mobile.

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When she saw Sam's name on the screen Rachel sent him a silent thank you and opened his message.

Sam: No backing out, Shaw. If you don't go we'll frog march you.

Talk about mixed signals.

Rachel: Bully.

She sighed and held the phone tightly in her hand, looking at the time display. Her appointment started in four minutes. If she was going, it had to be now.

Sam: Get in there now or I'll take your lunch money. Now I've got to go and put on a stupid hat. Love you.

Rachel thought of Sam and Ally. The many patient hours they had spent coaxing her into making the appointment, and reassuring her that it would be fine. The long, dull hours she had spent working in the computer shop saving up the money to pay for it. The look that would be on Ally's face this evening if Rachel told her she had lost her nerve.

Two minutes to go. She had worked out that every six minutes of the appointment cost her an hour's wages. Before tax. She had pre-paid for it, in an effort to force herself to go, and her food budget was at rock bottom for the month.

She slid off the bench in a hurry as a couple sat at the other end of it and started kissing passionately. Apparently oblivious to Rachel's presence, the man slid his hands up his girlfriend's t-shirt and squeezed her hips.

Rachel shuddered and went back to the train station.

That evening, she and Ally decorated Sam's flat, ready for his surprise graduation party.

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“You don’t think we’ve gone a little overboard, do you?” she asked Ally. Sam was meticulously neat and his flat was tastefully decorated in white with green accents and dark wood furniture. At the moment it was brightened by fifty assorted balloons, purple and silver streamers, and a glittering banner.

“I have no idea what you mean,” said Ally.

Rachel looked out of the window at the sound of an approaching car. “He’s back.”

She tossed empty balloon packets in the bin while Ally shoved the step ladder back in a cupboard. They took up their positions either side of the front door and waited as the key turned in the lock.

“Congratulations!” Rachel pulled the string on a popper and watched a trail of pink and green strands float down onto Sam’s startled face.

He grinned and pulled them off his nose, throwing them back at her.

“Sam Ayres, Master of Art,” said Ally, aiming another popper at him. Sam ducked this time and caught the strands, throwing them immediately into Ally’s blonde hair.

“Hey!” she said.

“Welcome to your graduation party, most intelligent of us all,” said Rachel. She held a gold balloon out and bowed several times. Sam took the balloon and bounced it first off her head, then Ally’s.

“Shut up,” he said, still grinning. “But thanks.”

“I see having a master’s degree isn’t improving your manners,” said Ally, brushing blue strands from her hair onto the carpet.

“Thanks god I can rely on my looks,” said Sam. He ducked as Ally threw the empty popper case at him, and surveyed the room. “Tasteful,” he said, nodding.

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“You’d better be grateful,” Rachel said. “I have lock-jaw from blowing up all those balloons. Ally was no help at all.”

Ally sat in an armchair and widened her eyes innocently. “Nobody was more upset than me when I couldn’t help. Not my fault I had a very important phone call just as we started on the balloons.”

Rachel covered her mouth and whispered loudly to Sam. “It was a wrong number.”

“Yeah, well,” said Ally. “I was in charge of catering.”

Sam walked over to his coffee table where several brightly-coloured crisp packets clashed with a lime green tablecloth.

“There’s pizza coming, too,” said Ally, defensively.

“I love it, thank you. Really.” Sam kissed Ally on the head, blew a kiss at Rachel, and sat down on the sofa.

“How was the ceremony?” Rachel took a packet of tortilla chips and curled up in an armchair.

“Went on forever but my parents seemed to enjoy it. I’m glad I didn’t invite anyone else. I looked like a right dick in that stupid hat and cape.”

Rachel could picture the look of fierce pride her foster moulder would have if Rachel had ever graduated. Then she remembered Constance’s tight-jawed expression when she had marched Rachel into school to get her GCSE results.

Her birth mother hadn’t cared then and wouldn’t care now. Even a PhD wouldn’t impress her. Not that Rachel had any hope of that.

“Please tell me there were pictures?” Ally rummaged through the pile of snacks on the table and picked out a bag of popcorn.

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Sam grimaced.

“There are pictures!” said Rachel. “God bless that cameraman.”

“Pictures that you will never see,” Sam said. “So, did you go to the doctor, Shaw?”

“No,” she said, looking into the bag of chips as if there was something fascinating at the bottom.

Sam didn’t push it the way Ally had. He understood her aversion to therapy, having also been forced into it as a teenager. In his case, when he’d told his deeply religious parents that he was gay.

“One day she will,” said Ally. “Won’t you?”

Looking at the brave face Ally was putting on to cover her disappointment and concern, Rachel felt a wave of guilt. “One day. Promise.”

An hour later, feeling very full of pizza, she asked to borrow Sam’s laptop and searched for qualifications she could take in her spare time. Maybe she wasn’t ready for therapy yet but she was definitely ready to get a better job. Any other job.

After a while she closed the laptop and hugged her knees.

“No luck, Shaw?” said Sam.

Rachel shook her head. “I need either previous qualifications or practical experience. Unless I want to take a degree in working on a shop checkout, I’m doomed to minimum wage forever.”

“You don’t need a degree to be a script writer,” said Ally. She was lying on the sofa with her head in Sam’s lap, half her attention still on the TV screen where a 24 boxset was playing.

“I’m never going to do that professionally. It’s just a hobby. I need to be realistic.”

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“So what qualifications were you looking at?” Sam asked.

“Animal care. I volunteered at the sanctuary I got Jasper from, years ago. It’s the only other thing I’ve ever done. But even for that you need a couple of good GCSE grades. Best I got was a D in geography.”

“You have to think positively,” said Ally, sitting up. “Why not send your script off to a... well, wherever you send scripts off.”

“Because it’s not finished and even if it was, it’s no good. Anyway, I need a realistic goal. Let me start by getting a different job in retail.”

“One of the waitresses at the café is leaving soon,” said Ally, referring the coffee shop where she worked part time. “I could get you an interview.”

Rachel smiled. “Thanks for thinking of me. I’m too much of a freak to work there, though. I’ve seen how crowded it gets when it’s busy.”

It always came down to the same problem. If there was a way to get over her phobia, endless doors would open up. But she had been this way ever since she was a child and no amount of wishful thinking or time was going to cure her.

“Speaking of work, I’d better go,” she said, standing up. “I can’t be late tomorrow or I’ll have no job at all.”

“Well, then you could spend all your weekends with us,” said Sam.

“Do you want me to starve?”

“We’ll feed you,” said Ally. “You can live in my shed.”

“Too generous.” Rachel shrugged her jacket on. “But you forget I’m a single mother. Jasper needs security.”

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“He’s a cat,” said Sam.

“And? That’s the closest thing I’m going to get to a human baby, and I’m not making him live in a shed and live on your scraps.” She paused at the door to add: “Love you.”