**Marmalade**

"I don't want to lose my daughter!"

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. They shouldn't have, because I'd heard those words so many times before, but I couldn't help it. Seeing her stood there, bristling with rage, with the untidy kitchen as a battlefield, I could only grit my teeth and stare back. Words failed me. They stuck in my throat, betraying me, when I just needed them to help her understand. If she understood, it might've been easier. Maybe there wouldn't be fire blazing in her features, misunderstanding skipping a step and becoming fury.

"I only want what's best for you, Rose." Even the name stung, but I bit the inside of my cheek and remained silent, until the metallic taste of blood leaked onto my tongue. "This isn't right. You **know** you're a girl, don't you? You can't change that, and you—you shouldn't!" Anger. Again. Wild. Flaring up at a moment's notice. My throat dried, teeth clinging to my cheek. Some small part of me knew that there was nothing I could say to change her mind, but I still didn't want to believe it. "I'm not talking about this anymore. Don't bring it up again."

That last warning was her final word on the matter, as my mum turned, picking up the bright blue packet of cigarettes on the kitchen countertop and disappearing into the garden. The door slammed shut behind her.

My shoulders slumped, as a long breath escaped from my lungs. Another battle. Another loss. Another retreat, by both parties. I couldn't stay in the cramped kitchen, as the cream walls began to loom over me in the absence of my main enemy—I hated thinking of her like that, but it was true. I loved her, and she loved who I used to be. At that moment in time, any conversation could end in conflict, no matter how innocent.

Sparing one glance out of the kitchen window and seeing a heavy cloud of grey smoke float past the dusty glass, I made up my mind. Stalking down the hall, I grabbed my coat from the bannister, feeling in the pockets for my keys. As soon as my fingers touched the cold metal, I spun around, and came face-to-face with Marmalade.

"Get down, silly." The stark ginger feline had climbed up a cabinet and sat herself on top, tail drifting from side to side. With two round, glassy eyes, she slowly blinked a greeting, but I couldn't quite appreciate it—my anger couldn't just drain away, even at the sight of such a cute creature. It stuck, clouding my mind with an overwhelming darkness that I couldn't get rid of. "Down, Marmalade."

Unsurprisingly, she chose to ignore me, until I was swinging open the front door and stepping out into a grey world, full of pavements and carbon-copy houses. Then, she decided to hop over the plastic threshold, with the closest thing to a smirk that a cat could muster. We'd played this game before. Shaking my head, I closed the door and gave her a few seconds to begin meowing and scratching, begging to be let back in. Nothing. Just those large eyes looking up at me, the tail forever moving from side to side.

"Marmalade and Matty, going on an adventure." Muttering the words, somewhat reminiscent of a children's story, I began the first few tentative steps to the brick wall, the absolute end of our house before the pavement and the road.

She followed. At a casual, walking pace, on top of neighbours' front garden walls, but she followed. Miserable clouds, the usual thick, dark collection, watched over as I shoved my hands into my coat pockets and looked up, then down when it felt too awkward to look up. Unwanted feelings were already piercing my mind, attempting to fight with the buried anger for control. *Your chest*. I took another step. One foot in front of the other. Just keep walking. *But your chest, Matty, they're looking at it*.

They weren't, not that I knew who 'they' were. 'They' could've been the family walking on the opposite side of the street, a perfect little 'proper' family, mum and dad, two small children and a baby in a pram. 'They' could've been the few cars passing by, too fast to notice faces or to realise if they were watching me. Wondering. *Looking at your chest*.

Gritting my teeth, I let myself fall into the thoughts with a half-hearted intention of getting rid of them. It didn't work, but I knew it wouldn't. *Chest. Crotch. Face. Hips. Arms.* Everything was wrong, and everyone was looking, even when their eyes were elsewhere. They had to be, because the thoughts insisted that they were. Imperfections were one thing on their own, but when paired with peering eyes, nosy people, constantly judging, they became a monster. Invisible, perhaps, but didn't that make it more difficult to fight?

Not that fighting was a serious option. My battles with my mum had exhausted me, to the point where every tiny conflict became a war. Teenagers weren't meant to fight in wars—they were meant to be focused on education and socialising, and getting part-time jobs, looking after siblings and feeding pets. My time was split thinly between everything. All my energy was lost every time I sat down at the kitchen table, or came home after school. Terse conversation became full-blown yelling bouts, no matter the original topic. Everything came back to… **that**. The fact that she'd never accept me as Matty, no matter how hard I tried to convince her.

At the end of the road, there lay an unreliable sanctuary; the park was sometimes a freeing place, with only the creak of abandoned swings as background music, but not always. Sometimes, it was inhabited.

*They're watching*. All of a sudden, I knew exactly who 'they' were. My eyes pinpointed them, checking every face like a potential threat, darting from person to person. The smaller children, racing around like hyper cartoon characters, up a slide one minute and hanging from monkey bars the next. The teenagers, sprawled over benches and perched on the top of children's play equipment. The parents, eyes glued to their phones or tending to crying infants. *They're all watching. They've noticed. Your chest. Face. Hair. Chin.*

*Meow*. Startled out of my thoughts, I looked down: Marmalade. She'd hopped down from a wall and begun to circle my legs, comforting. Relieved at having a distraction, I began the journey once again, determined to get… somewhere. Maybe a swing—no, they were all taken. Benches were occupied by a combination of young and older adults, sometimes barely distinguishable in hooded jackets and cuddled up to partners. There was a little grove of trees, and rather tall bushes, towards the back of the park, but it was usually occupied by the less savoury characters from school, characterised by smoke and the stench of cheap beer.

"**Rose**." Eyes wide, I realised where I'd walked—right by a bench, right by other people, right by *them, they've noticed you, idiot.* "You don't mind me using that name, right? Not like the other one's real, like."

"Uh—I—" I recognised him. Alex Heaton. Sat there, arm draped around his girlfriend of two years. In my school year. In my classes. There was blood on my tongue again. "It's my—it **is** my real—"

"Stop with the liberal bull. Don't know why I bothered," that was directed at the girl, her name escaping me in the moment, although her giggle, rather light and cheery, was too familiar, "but you can't give up on people, babe. Gotta keep giving chances, like. **She** might be normal, one day." His gaze was back on me, lips twisted into a victorious sneer. *Chest. Lips. You'll never be a man.*

Too much. It was all too much. An all-encompassing tidal wave of stress came crashing down onto my mind, as I ran. One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other. One foot—one foot—one foot—

she was a little blur, a ginger creation, wandering through overgrown grasses like a fairy creature. Little paws swatting at a low-flying midge, tail up, with a sparkle in her eyes. Whimsical. A forest spirit, leading me into a small, shady clearing, the lush undergrowth still wet with morning dew.

Kneeling, almost sinking into the soft ground, I watched her play so innocently. For a long, blissful moment, there were no thoughts in my mind, leaving only a peaceful emptiness. Birds called to each other overhead, almost completely invisible but for a rustling in the leaves. Dappled sunlight fell down between branches, creating a delicate light show, drifting a little with a gentle breeze. Heaven. Thoughtless heaven. Marmalade had led to me a true haven.

Buzzing in the background, the chaos of the park seemed a world away. Children's joyful screams duetted with birdsong, distant cars blending in with the lightly whistling wind. It couldn't entirely block out the unwelcome thoughts prickling at my mind after the initial euphoria subsided, but it quieted them.

"I think I love it here." Flopping back onto the grass, not caring for a moment if it stained my clothes, I gazed up at snatches of a silver sky between the foliage and let myself smile. "You little angel." Whiskers brushed against my cheek, inquisitive, but she left a few seconds later, tail sweeping over my face. "I… do you think people would like it here? Other people?" Rambling, I let the words wash over my tongue, basking in this new-found peace. *Chest. Jaw. Fingers*. Well, not quite peace, but close. "They might, y'know. Beautiful places do things to people." I was fully aware of how ridiculous this was, speaking to no one—or, I suppose, speaking to a cat. But in the moment, it made more sense than anything I'd ever done. "I wish I'd brought her here—mum. Before I told her."

My voice faltered. Flashes of a late night spent screaming at each other from opposite sides of the living-room attempted to ruin the tranquillity, scratching away at the calming atmosphere which Marmalade had brought me to. Unsettled, I sat up. She had rolled onto her side, exposing a lighter, fluffier underbelly to the world—I knew from experience never to try and tickle or pet that underbelly, no matter how tempting it was. But those memories, of childish mistakes with no real consequences, they were a little brighter. A little more cheerful.

There **was** kindness in the world, and moments of humour. Beauty, obviously, and intelligence. Clever designs and systems, creative splashes of colours and ideas. Not everywhere, and not all the time. Even within the picturesque, serene places, tendrils of negativity could wander in, but then they were forced to co-exist with positivity.

With even a pinprick of light, darkness became a lot less deafening.