Just as I thought the week would never end, Saturday was suddenly upon me. It ended up coming faster than I was prepared for, and gave me anxiety on top of my usual anxiety.

Before I knew it, Friday classes had ended, I worked a busy shift at the bowling alley, and slept in all the way to Saturday afternoon. Without a single drop of alcohol. Mental exhaustion simply multiplied with physical and my feathered pillow took care of the rest. Now I’m dusting furniture with that same pillow while guzzling a sports drink with way too much sugar in it.

The reason for my nervous fidgeting and frantic apartment cleaning for no justifiable reason? It’s time for the fall festival, a pre-Halloween celebration in which everyone raids the boardwalk in costume and has until midnight to pick a partner to dance the ‘boardwaltz’ with.

It’s been a tradition for years, and being a college town, it’s really blown up recently with students. I guess there’s some allure to picking up some randomly disguised dude or chick that people go crazy over, not that I understand at all.

As a matter of fact, people make me anxious, and strangers are even worse, especially when they’re wearing one of those creepy masquerade masks, which most of these festival goers do. They tend to show off most of their bodies, boys and girls alike, while hiding their faces. I get the anonymity aspect of the whole thing, but at a certain point it just comes across as shady, like everyone’s afraid they won’t get picked if they show their true face.

……not that I’m really any better.

See, there’s this big part of the tradition, which says that if there’s an uneven number of people on the boardwalk by midnight, it’s wicked bad luck, and that the person that goes un-picked(since that’s how math works), is deemed the ‘Black Cat’.

The Black Cat, destined to remain a poor loser who will never find love, in return gets the power to curse any couple whose dance he manages to ‘cut in’ to, so to speak. He has until 12:12 to hijack as many waltzes as possible. If he fails to disturb any couples, he remains the lone loser, cursed for life. If, per say, he breaks up five different couples, he gets to share his burden of loneliness with those ten people evenly.

It’s actually surprisingly fair as far as curses go, and it turns the whole festival into a pretty fun game that everybody really gets into at the end of the night.

So that brings me to why I’m not any better than the masquerading fools. On campus and at my job, hell basically anytime I go outside, I wear a black hat with a bent bill, and keep my head low. Like I said, I don’t much like people. Super edgy, I know. Can’t help it. Anyway, I wear the hat everywhere, every day, to the point people have named me “Black Hat”.(Yeah, I know…) Someone, who I’ll get to, referred to me Black Hat at last year’s festival, and somehow a few of my classmates started doing it afterward. And in the last few weeks leading up to this year’s festival, a strange amount of people on campus are addressing me as Black Hat. I’m not sure if it’s a term of endearment, but they seemed to start acknowledging my existence, which is something I guess, and I even made a few kinda-sorta-friends just from that.

Yet, even with that, I still, for the most part, keep my head low. I never show my true face. Or maybe that loner punk look is my true face, I dunno, it’s too convoluted a thing to think about. Anyway, last year, I wore black jeans, a white hoodie and my black hat under the hood, and ended up dancing with my best friend Aaron, just to prevent from having to embarrass ourselves. Nothing weird about it, okay?

So, this year, I’m really feeling wordplay and making fun of myself, so I got a hold of a pretty trendy black cat costume. Well, there’s another reason for it, but I’ll get to it.

Anyway, I cleaned for a few hours, met up with Aaron, enjoyed the festival for a while, and then went back to change. Now we’re walking back through the festival in our costumes, heading for the boardwalk’s main pier, toward the main event of the evening. I’m wearing my somewhat form-fitting black cat costume, and the head is surprisingly small and not overwhelming to wear, so I even wore my black hat over it to perfect the pun.

“Man, I’m really not sure what the hell you’re expecting to accomplish with that getup,” Aaron jabbed.

“I don’t even want to hear it from you,” I replied. He was wearing, in all seriousness, a full tuxedo and bowtie, the polished black shoes, and had his jet-black hair slicked back. Nothing over his smarmy looking face but a stupid smirk. I couldn’t deny it, he looked pretty spiffy, but I’ll never tell him that.

“Your joke is a lot worse than mine, honestly. I think all the girls will just find it creepy. Maybe you’ll find a big nerdy fellow who gets your reference and you can make him blossom on the dance floor.”

“You’re just jealous because you know it’s a genius idea, the most gentlemanly of costumes,” he bragged. “I’m going to be the one to snatch a fine lady this time, and only you’ll end up unlucky! Honestly, do you really think that rosy girl is gonna recognize you just from the black hat? Seems a bit crazy if ya ask me.”

“It’s not just the hat, it’s the cat too. Unluckiness is her thing, remember?”

Indeed, last year, I met a gorgeous girl after midnight. It would be more accurate to say that she snatched me, though. There Aaron and I were, awkwardly waltzing, when a slightly taller girl with pale skin and curvy figure, wearing a silky green dress and thirteen black roses in her dark hair, swooped in and pushed a dumbfounded Aaron into the plywood.

Yes, she was the Black Cat last year. But instead of continuing to break couples up, she simply stopped at us, and danced with me until it was over. So, it looked to everyone else like Aaron was the Black Cat, fumbling around in his stupid toga. It went by really fast and I was really nervous, so the only part of our brief meeting I can remember, aside from her taking the lead in conversation and dance, was that she complemented my black hat, and at the end told me “See ya next time, Black Hat!”

Hence the elaborately pun-filled, unlucky getup. I have a pretty bulletproof plan if I may say, that is, if she’s even here.

“Maybe this time she’ll realize how much of a girl you are, hahaha.”

Ignoring Aaron, I stepped onto the main pier with my nerves on fire. Not paying any mind to the stares I was getting, I separated from Aaron.

11:55

I haven’t spotted her, and the nerves were gaining on me. What if she really doesn’t catch on, or even remember me at all?

11:57

This is too much. People are starting scramble, and it almost feels inevitable that I’ll be left.

11:58

I have to calm down. It’s okay if I’m left, that’s what I’m going for. If I don’t see her I’ll retreat with my tail between my legs. The plan only works if I’m the one left.

11:59

Oh wow, Aaron still hasn’t found anyone. Maybe this year there won’t be a Black Cat and I’ll just have to dance with him again. That would just be bad luck in itself, though.

12:00

I lost Aaron. I’m alone. Shit, I guess she really isn’t-

“Hey there, nice hat.”

There she actually was, tapping my shoulder from behind. I turned to see her wearing the same dress and thirteen black roses, the stems covering up much of her face.

“H-hi.”

“You kept the hat on, huh?”

“Yeah, a lot of people have been commenting on it, recently.”

“Hehe…is that right?” She asked, trying hold back a grin.

“Yeah, but why is that funny?”

When I realized it, we were already dancing.

“Weeell, I wanted to make sure you showed up since we never saw he each other after last time, so I may have planted a few seeds,” She replied with a sweet grin, taking the lead again.

“Wait, did you…”

“I talked to a few people. You didn’t notice, did you?”

“So that’s why…people have been talking to me.”

“Isn’t that also because of your fun, black sense of humor?” She asked, poking the nose of my costume.

“Ah, so you got that too, huh?”

“You’re pretty clever. The many jokes aside, it made me the only person who would pick you.”

“That’s exactly what I was-”

“CAAAAAAAAT!!!”

Aaron suddenly screamed out, making a beeline for us. He broke through couple after couple with a crazy look in his eye.

“If I can’t be happy, neither can youuuu!!!”

As he lunged toward us, the girl swung me around low, completely dodging Aaron, and sticking her foot out at the last moment to send him flying into the plywood.

He looked up, and his eyes opened wide at me. I was so shocked I didn’t even realize it till he did. My black hat, along with the cat head, had fallen off me during the wild maneuver. With it, my mid length black hair flowed out.

“Aha, you look even prettier without the hat,” she declared, lifting me back up to eye level.

Frozen and out of my comfort zone, I struggled to reply.

“Did you know…I was…”

“Yeah, I could tell.”

At that moment, the festival’s firework finale erupted into the night sky, illuminating both of our faces.

“I’m Rose, by the way,” she said with a wink.

“It’s good to finally meet you. My name’s Kat.”

In the next ten minutes, we danced with huge grins on our faces, successfully dodging Aaron all the way to 12:12 while he pulled off the historical feat of breaking up every last couple on the floor, aside from us. And so, it was on this night, that the unlucky black cat, the thirteen black roses, and the festival’s Black Cat and all his victims, all shared the same curse equally.