

## Mia

By J.M. Stephens

Staring through the curtains of the front window, I'm becoming more convinced by the minute that she isn't coming. I've been in a constant state of nervousness since Tuesday, mixed with excitement and a tinge of doubt.

*Is this just going to be another disappointment in my life?*

She said 6.30 and the clock shows 6.40.

*Maybe it's for the best anyway. I'd probably blow the whole thing.*

This past year has been a defining one for me. I'd turned sixteen a month before school started the new year and I began forming serious crushes on girls my own age.

---

Having grown up with few friends—none, in fact—I'd developed an interest in books. I read action books, westerns, James Bond, etc. I even liked reading Mills and Boon books, but I kept that to myself, hiding them at the back of my wardrobe. I didn't want my mother to think I was weird or anything. I tried to memorize the language that the guys used in the stories, the special lingo and phrases that seemed to make the girls' hearts melt. The guys seemed tough and manly, yet at the same time, romantic. I placed myself right in the heart of the story, which, without fail, culminated in a frantic romance-charged embrace and wet mashing of lips.

I wanted to be like the heroes in the books I'd read and the movies I'd watched. The hero always gets the girl after saving her from some catastrophe or villain. Or sometimes, as in Mills and Boon, the guy was just damaged goods like myself, a quiet brooding loner with a chip on his shoulder stemming from his past, not ready to love again, but luckily for him, the girl (who he loves but doesn't realize it yet) could see into his heart, and helps him rid himself of his demons—and of course they both fall in love in the process.

Most of the girls my age were becoming women, developing breasts, their bodies changing to a curvier shape with their hips seemingly becoming bigger than their waists. They were changing from a generic boyish shape to a softer and more womanly one. The way they walked seemed different, their hips kind of undulating in a way that fascinated me. I was no longer fantasizing about Miss Pringle, my math teacher, but more and more about girls my age.

And then I saw Mia.

Mia was a little shorter than me, with plaited blonde hair that ran halfway down her back. She was long legged, well-proportioned, and well developed. Her complexion was pale and I think she was of Swedish descent.

I always tried to sit near the front of the class during English. Mia always sat at the same desk every day, one row behind me and across the aisle.

I would often purposely drop my pencil and peek across to try and catch a glimpse of Mia. I'd get a tingle down my spine whenever the teacher would call Mia's name in class, and I'd hear her voice answering. Once, she was called to the front of the class and her hip brushed my arm on the way past. The feeling of that touch stayed with me for the rest of the day.

It's impossible to accurately describe the power Mia had over me. She had an aura, a presence. She was different than all of the other girls. She had my heart locked in her prison and I had no desire or need to be set free.

Mia had become the only focus in my life and I spent most of my waking hours thinking about her.

I felt that I was a lot more mature in my thoughts and attitudes than I was the year before. When I fantasized about Miss Pringle, there was no emotional aspect to it. It was purely physical, although not in a sexual way. I don't know what it was really, maybe just a fascination with her mature body. With Mia, it was love as well as physical attraction, but it was mostly love. In my private moments I pictured her and my imagination did the rest.

Mia was always laughing and smiling. I have never seen a girl so happy, and it was contagious. It was also what made her so hot. I used to watch Mia as much as possible. I'd follow her around at morning and afternoon recess, and at lunchtime, always at a safe distance.

Sometimes I would follow her home, trying to work up the courage to approach her, but I found courage a hard thing to come by.

I often fantasized about sitting with her at lunchtime, laughing and joking, and when that inevitable awkward silence of a four or five second interval occurred, we would gaze into each other's eyes, our smiles would change into a thoughtful facial expressions and we would lean in and kiss, just like in the movies. I wanted a girlfriend, and I wanted it to be Mia.

Mia was popular with the boys and there was always three or four hanging around her at lunchtime. I'd wanted to approach her so many times, but there were always other boys talking and joking with her. I used to kind of slink up as close as I could to try and hear what the other boys were saying so I could have some sort of idea of what to say to her and impress her with my smoothness and humor.

I can recall one particular day when I was hanging around close to Mia and four guys, and one of them noticed me. He nudged the guy next to him and whispered something, and they both looked at me. I moved away from them. It played on my mind for the rest of the day and I instinctively knew that something wasn't right. There was a niggling feeling, an unspoken, veiled, but all too real threat. When the final bell rang that afternoon, I left class and headed for the bus. As I rounded the corner of the building, a group of four guys blocked my path. I didn't know their names, but they were the ones who were with Mia earlier that day. I moved to go around them, but they blocked me again.

"Where do ya think you're going, Jones?" one said, grinning.

I said nothing. The question was obviously irrelevant. I knew where the situation was heading and I needed to find an escape route, fast. The other three circled around me and I had nowhere to go. The guy behind me pushed me into the one in front and he pushed me back again.

"What's up Jones?" he said, head tilted to the side and still sporting his idiot grin. "I asked you a question." He started shaping up, shuffling his feet and holding his fists up like a prize boxer, but with a lot less talent. He was my height, probably about the same weight, but had a tough, wiry physique. His blonde hair was very short except for the fringe. He had his hair parted on the left and his fringe completely covered his right eye. He had to continuously flick the hair to one side to see. He had sunken cheeks, and there probably wasn't an ounce of fat on his body. I wondered if maybe his parents spent their money on booze rather than food. I'm not sure which would have been the biggest waste of money.

I lowered my eyes and stared at the ground. There was no answer that would have satisfied him. I felt a push from the guy on my right and I fell into the one on my left. He in turn punched the side of my head and I buckled to the ground.

“Come on Jones, you freak,” said ‘Fringe.’ “Got the hots for Mia have you? Mia don’t want to know you. OK? Now get up.”

From my position on my ground, I could see only one way out of this situation. I was down on one knee and both hands were on the ground in front of me. It occurred to me that I was in the sprint starting position. Without looking up I eyed the gap between him and the one next to him, and I took off with as much acceleration as I could muster, barging between them and bolting toward the front gate and the safety of crowds of people and parents who were picking up their kids. The bus stop was just outside the car park entrance and I had to run about 80 yards to reach it.

They gave chase and caught me from behind, grabbing my shirt collar before I could round the corner into the car park. Two of them grabbed my arms and a third walked behind, pushing me along. They dragged and pushed me to the boys’ toilet, which was all but deserted at that time of day. I braced my feet against the stall, but I knew it was useless. I felt a punch to my stomach and resisted no more.

They dragged me into the stall and lifted me over the toilet bowl, feet in the air, head down, and lowered me in. A toilet bowl in the boy’s toilet at the end of the school day is not a pretty sight, especially that particular one, which wasn’t flushed the last time it was used. “Piece of crap, meet your cousins,” one of them said amidst laughter and crazed giggling from the rest of them. Like The Riddler in the Batman movies. I closed my eyes and felt the cold water against my forehead. Each of them held either an arm or a leg, and I was helpless. Someone flushed the toilet and I had to hold my breath until it finished. They lowered my feet to the floor and, with my head still in the bowl, dropped the seat down on top of me. They then fled the scene, whooping and giggling until their voices faded into the distance.

I went to the wash basin and washed my hair as best as I could under the tap, shook the water out like a wet dog, then walked through the car park and out the gate to wait for the next bus. I sat as far away as possible from the other students and tried to ignore the smell as much as I could. We were about halfway to my stop when I looked out the window and spotted one of the four thugs walking up the path toward the front door of a house. I burned an image of his face in my mind, as well as the number and facade of his house.

Although I was the shy, quiet kind of guy, a lot went on in my head that only I knew; thoughts of retribution, plans and schemes to exact revenge on the tormentors and bullies who made my life miserable, ideas of practical jokes that would embarrass and ridicule them in front of the entire school, fantasies of becoming a boxer or martial artist and beating the stuffing out of my enemies—only when pushed to do so, of course, and only after I issued an obligatory warning. “Walk away while you can,” or “Are you sure you want to do this?” Because heroes always give a warning. I would force them to apologize in front of the whole school. It would not only stop the harassment and bring me respect but at the same time would make me attractive to the opposite sex. My mind was filled with a thousand ways to humiliate, embarrass, or punish those who had wronged me. But despite the brilliance and ingenuity of my ideas for vengeance, that’s what they remained—ideas, unrealistic schemes and wasted thoughts never to be acted on.

I arrived home and headed straight for the shower. I washed my hair at least four or five times and still couldn’t get the stench out. Maybe it was mostly in my mind.

The incident didn’t deter me from the object of my desire. I would lie in bed at night having conversations with Mia in my head.

Occasionally at school I would spot her coming out of the toilet or just sitting down on a bench at lunchtime and I'd tell myself to just go over and say hi before any other boys came along, but I could never bring myself to do it. I didn't know how to approach her, or what to say.

A couple of times, I psyched myself up and told myself that I'm just going to do it. Just walk right up to her, full of confidence, and say "Hi Mia, I'm Stephen. Did you know we are in the same English class?" That would get a conversation started, and it would lead to who-knows-what...maybe even a date.

One day, at lunchtime, I saw my chance. She was sitting alone, taking her lunch out of her bag. I walked towards her, repeating my lines in my head. ("Hi Mia, I'm Stephen. Did you know we're in the same English class? Hi Mia, I'm Stephen. Did you know we're in the same English class?")

Just before I reached her, I panicked and veered off into a different direction.

A few days later, I accidentally came face to face with her as we were rounding a corner in opposite directions. She smiled and said "Oops, sorry," and stepped to one side to continue on her way.

That was my chance.

"Mia," I called, and she turned around to face me.

"Yes?" she asked with an inquisitive smile.

I just stood and stared at her. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to say. The meeting was unexpected, and I hadn't had a chance to rehearse my pickup lines. My bottom lip started trembling. I was so intimidated by her beautiful face, and I suddenly felt unworthy. I had started something that I realized I couldn't finish. I felt self-conscious. I felt as if everyone around me was looking at me, waiting for me to say something, snickering amongst themselves, but, in actual fact, everyone was just hurrying by, getting to their classes.

"Are you ok?" she asked with a concerned look and a tilt of her head.

I tried to say something, but my lip was trembling too much and no words would come.

"I'm sorry," I managed to say, eventually, and almost in a whisper.

I turned and hurried away.

The days passed by, then the weeks, then the months, and I still hadn't worked up the courage to talk to Mia. I would see her every day on the school grounds and also in class, and she would look at me in a strange, almost sympathetic, way.

Before I knew it, it was the last week before the summer holidays. I decided I'd have to confront Mia and just ask her out. If the result was favorable, we might be able to spend some time together over the holidays, and if she turned me down, at least I had the whole of the holidays to get over it. I looked for a chance at morning recess. She was busy talking to some girl students.

I followed her around for the whole lunch break and again at afternoon recess. I had several small windows of opportunity, but I hesitated each time, and she would start talking to someone else.

The afternoon bell rang and I realized the only chance I had left was to follow Mia home. Hopefully an opportunity would arise to speak to her. I got on the same bus as Mia and sat four rows behind her. I couldn't take my eyes off her—her long plaited hair, her smooth, shapely legs exposed all the way up to the sports shorts she wore under her short school uniform. She was chatted and laughed with another girl.

When we got to her stop, I followed her off the bus and walked about twenty steps behind her.

I knew it was only a three-minute walk to her house, so I had to act fast. I just needed to work up the courage to catch up to her. At one point she turned around and looked at me. I stopped and pulled a piece of paper from my pocket and pretended I was looking for an address.

She continued walking and I followed again.

Mia stopped and turned to face me.

“Are you following me?” she asked.

My eyes widened in fear and I shook my head.

“Yes, you are. You’re following me. What do you want?”

“I umm...umm...” I stammered. “I umm... just wanted to...I’m Stephen. We’re in the same English class.”

‘Pheww,’ I thought. That wasn’t so hard. That’s the icebreaker taken care of.

“Yes, I damn-well know you’re in my English class,” she said, her eyes piercing me. “I want to know why you’re following me.”

“Well,” I began, “I was wondering if I... if you...if we could...”

A voice called from behind me. It was Matt, one of those Johnny-football-heroes. A year ahead of me, he was the star of the school football team, admired by boys who jostled for position around him and drooled over by girls who wanted to be noticed by him. Matt was huge for his age, at least 200 pounds of what looked to me like solid muscle. He even had hair on his chest, visible through the strained buttons of his shirt that looked a size too small. His hair was cut in a short ‘flat top’ style, army-like. He seemed to have no neck. His head was joined to his shoulders by thick sinew.

“Is this creep bothering you, Mia?” he asked, looking at me as if he was about to rip my head off.

“It’s ok, Matt, I can handle this,” she said.

It was as if Matt didn’t hear. He moved towards me with a wild look in his eyes.

“Get lost you weirdo!” he said. “Leave Mia alone. Go crawl back under your rock.”

“But I just wanted to...”

“I said get out of here!” he said, saliva spraying from his mouth as he spoke.

“No, Matt! Leave him. I can handle it,” repeated Mia, appearing to panic at Matt’s loss of temper.

“Mia,” I began, turning to her, “I only wanted to...”

Matt charged and knocked me to the ground. He sat astride my chest and started raining down punches on my face.

“Stop it, Matt! Just stop it! Leave him alone!” Mia shouted, reefing on his collar and trying to drag him off me.

“Get off him, Matt!” she screamed and burst into tears.

Matt stood up and spat on me.

“Leave Mia alone, you creep,” he said and turned to Mia. “If he bothers you again, you just let me know.”

“Just go, Matt.” she said softly, without emotion.

Matt angrily pointed at me and said, “I’m watching you. Frickin’ weirdo!”

To drive the message home, he pointed two fingers back at his eyes, then to me.

Matt loped away like a Neanderthal. Mia kneeled down next to me and took a tissue out of her pocket. She lifted my head onto her lap and began wiping the blood from above my eye.

“Are you alright, Stephen? What is it? What do you want?” she asked softly, looking into my eyes, her hand lightly resting on my forehead, taking away the pain of Matt’s beating.

I looked into her eyes. They were filled with tears. Her face was like that of an angel. I couldn't believe my good fortune. Here I was with the girl of my dreams, and I had my head in her lap, feeling her cool, soft hand on my skin and listening to her angelic voice saying my name. It somehow made the beating worthwhile. I was the luckiest guy in the world. If ever there was an 'icebreaker,' that had to be it.

Then it just came out of nowhere. That inevitable awkward silence of three or four seconds where we searched each other's eyes, just one soul looking into another soul. Just like in the movies.

I felt a little faint and groggy, like the hero in the movie or book as he lay, dying, mortally wounded in the act of saving the life of the girl he loves, who had spurned his advances throughout the whole movie, and she realizes all too late that she loves him, too, and is now watching him die in her arms.

In that instant, I knew what I had to do. It was the culmination of all my thoughts and fantasies involving not just Mia, but every girl I had ever wanted to hold, every girl I had ever fantasied about, including Miss Pringle. It was bringing into reality those romantic, passionate moments I had read in Mills and Boon books. I was being held by the arms of every girl who had invaded my dreams in the early morning hours just before waking, when my body naturally relieved the sexual tension that builds up over time and suddenly seeks release without warning in my sleep.

I looked at the smooth white flesh of her cheeks, at the gold sleepers in her ears, her hair pulled back away from her perfect face. Time seemed to stand still. The stars were aligned in perfect symmetry.

Without hesitating, without giving any thought that we might still be under Matt's watchful eye, and, truth be known, not even caring about the consequences, I put my hand behind her head and, closing my eyes, raised my head and pulled her to me, kissing her fully on the lips. My first kiss. My first touch of a girl. No, not just a girl, but the girl I had thought about and fantasized about for months, but the hottest girl in school. I was in love, and she was in love with me. My fingers moved through her hair and her lips felt cool and moist on mine. I could smell the scent of her skin. I had never even thought about a girl's skin having a scent, and it was amazing. Even the faint aroma of her perspiration was amazing. I didn't want the kiss to end, but Mia pulled away, using her hand on my forehead for leverage.

I opened my eyes and saw Mia's fist coming down, hitting me square on the nose, and then she pushed my head off her lap. It felt as though my nose was flattened. I could feel blood trickling from my nostrils. She stood and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, a look of disgust on her face.

Mia stormed off. "It's true what they say about you, Stephen Jones; you're fricking weird!"

As I watched her walk away, I wondered if that was the end for us.

When I got home, I sneaked in the back door and went straight to the bathroom to check my wounds. They weren't all that bad. There was a small split above my eye and a trickle of dried blood down my temple, and a slight red smear showing in one of my nostrils, but after washing my face in the sink, the injuries weren't all that noticeable. I easily explained it away to my mother as bumping my head on the front door as I opened it.

I slept without dreams, because my sleep was constantly interrupted by the day's events, and each time I woke, I lay there, re-living them in my mind, unable to shake the thoughts, creating scenarios that might have ended the encounter differently. I wondered how I was ever going to face Mia again.

I didn't take the bus to school. I walked, instead. I couldn't face Mia, even though I knew I would see her in class. I knew I was only postponing the inevitable. I sat at my desk before she came into class and I averted my eyes, but I could see in my peripheral vision that she was glaring at me as she walked past. For the 1<sup>st</sup> time that year, the whole morning passed without sneaking a glance at Mia, but I could sense that she was constantly looking at me. At lunchtime, I sat on a seat away from the rest of the students, watching them talking and laughing and excitedly sharing their stories.

Someone sat down beside me.

It was Mia.

"Hello Stephen."

I was frozen on the spot.

"About yesterday..." she said.

"I'm sorry," I quickly blurted out, surprising myself.

"No, I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have hit you."

I looked at Mia. No one had ever apologized to me for anything.

"You like me, don't you?" she asked. I looked down and nodded.

"Stephen, I have a boyfriend. And even if I didn't, I don't think we'd be right for each other. I don't feel that way about you."

Hearing Mia say that, I knew she was right. I'd been fooling myself all year to think she'd be interested in me. Deep down, I knew our personalities were completely different, and there was no way I could mix in the same circle of friends as hers. I could hardly utter a word in mixed company, and she was so outgoing, one of the most popular girls in school.

"How would you like to go on a date?" she asked, "this Saturday night, to a drive-in movie."

My eyes widened and darted to hers.

"NOT with me!" she said suddenly, reading my mind. "A double date. I have a friend, Kate. She's a lot like you. If you want, I can talk to her. She's never been on a date, and I think you'd both get along."

I looked at Mia. For the first time in my life, I felt comfortable talking to a girl. Maybe the previous day's events—actually speaking to her, being in her arms and kissing her—had broken some kind of barrier in my mind. It broke the ice. Her friendliness toward me made me feel at ease.

"Would you really do that for me?"

"I'll talk to her tonight," she replied. "I'll let you know tomorrow, ok?"

"Ok."

The next morning, Mia stopped at my desk on her way to hers and leaned close to me.

"It's all set for Saturday night," she whispered. "Give me your address and be ready at 6.30."

That sent a nervous shiver down my spine.

"And Stephen..."

"Yeh?"

"Don't mess this up. I'm going out on a limb for you here."

"I won't," I replied. "I promise."

For the rest of the week, I couldn't concentrate on anything but the coming Saturday night. I wondered if I could actually go through with it but knowing Mia would be there gave me confidence. I felt I had made a good friend in her.

---

So, here I am. It's Saturday night and I'm waiting at the window. She's 10 minutes late and my heart has begun to sink, although being stood-up wasn't totally unexpected.

A car suddenly pulls up outside and the horn emits 2 quick beeps. The passenger window rolls down and Mia sees me behind the open curtain and gives an urgent beckoning wave of her hand. This is it. My heart is pounding in my chest so hard I can see roadmaps pulsing in my eyes. It's now or never. I fight my nerves and an almost overwhelming feeling of dread and I open the door. I know that all I have to do is walk out that door and once it closes behind me, I'm committed and can't turn back. The door lock clicks behind me and I stand there with a sensation that I'm naked to the outside world.

"Come on!" Mia shouts, "We'll miss the start of the movie!"

I approach the car and Mia reaches behind her seat and pushes open the back door. As I get in, I see Kate looking away from me, out her window. A slightly chubby girl, she is wearing a pink dress which is tight at the waist, accentuating her figure. The short sleeves reveal her plump arms which look soft and feminine.

"Stephen," says Mia, "this is Kate. Kate...Stephen."

Kate hesitantly turns to face me. She has a round face and shoulder length brown hair, parted in the middle. She has a few pimples on her cheeks, almost concealed by makeup, and she's looking at me through large round glasses.

I look into her eyes. It's like looking into my own face in a mirror. Not the shape or the color, but the innocence, the nervousness, and the thrill of the moment and of the night ahead.

Kate's lips curl slightly, almost in a smile, and she slightly raises her hand in a kind of greeting.

"Hi" she whispers.

"Hi" I echo, mirroring her hand gesture. Her smile widens and I feel myself responding in kind. As the car accelerates away from the curb, I can feel a change within, like a sudden realization of...I don't know...something indescribable, something natural, something good.