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Love Struck

Rachel Wing

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Extract

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1

"Well, if it isn't Little Miss Hockers. . ."

At the sound of that voice I jumped out of my skin, and skilfully fell (well, actually it was more of a severe nose dive that sent me lurching head first) into the carrot crate. Trying to ignore the pain, and desperately trying to recover what little dignity I had left, I sat up. A little too quickly. My head collided with a spectacular elegance and poise into the shelf above, at which point I could have sworn I would never be able to think again. All other thoughts leaked out of the gaping crater now in my skull, leaving one resounding syllable that Mum would kill me for thinking, let alone crying out in agony.

It was at this point that I collapsed to the ground, clutching

my head and groaning in what could have been a perfect damsel-in-distress-type way, if I hadn't sounded so much like a wounded walrus. Over my moans, I could just hear a throaty chuckle as Jonah bent down beside me and took my hands in his, away from what was left of my battered head and into bliss. His grip was soothing and strong, and I instantly melted inside; my usual reaction to his skin touching mine.

"Woah – I know I'm a god, Hockers, but there's really no need to faint at my feet; people are staring. . ."

I opened my eyes slowly, as if stirring attractively from some incredibly painful dream, and even though my vision was hazy, Jonah was the most beautiful, blurry thing I'd ever seen in my life. But then I remembered that he hadn't called or texted once since *that* night, and his perfect (but evil) face came sharply into focus. That manly, strong jaw and gorgeous mouth, and the lip ring (hmm, lip ring); the black mop of hair, all tousled like he'd fallen out of bed; those long, thick lashes that I could never get, even with the most expensive mascara known to girlkind, and, of course, those most deadly addictive, brightly green, gold-flecked eyes that a fifteen-year-old girl could get completely lost in.

When in that moment, so it came to pass,

Holly waked, and straight away loved an ass.

Damn right he was an ass, but those eyes just took every last breath out of my body – every single time.

"I've broken my brain!" I grumbled, as I faintly realized that those eyes obviously whisked away my common sense as well as my vital necessities for life. He chuckled again – that yummy

chuckle that made my heart shiver like it had suddenly been caught in a draft – and let go of my hands to examine my head. His hands on my head had me thinking that I was going to pass out all over again.

"Nope, nothing broken, no brain leaking out; you're still in one piece. You'll live to save the world another day, Comic Book Kid."

If you ask around in my town for a "Holly Hockers: a fourth-year girl, medium height, medium build, darkish hair and stupid laugh, who likes to hang out at Ozzie's after school and can always be found with her iPod, jamming away to The Faeries, at any time day or night", I'm pretty sure that even with that detailed description, not one person would know to point me out. The crazy thing is that if you ask the first teenager you see on the high street where you can find the "Comic Book Kid", it will be me they'll take you straight to.

Almost every kid who goes to Cathen Comp knows about Ozzie's Ice Cream Parlour. It's sacrilege not to. I don't know how everyone else found out about it, but I've been going there since I was tiny, pretty much since it was open. Mum and Dad used to take me for a treat at the end of the week, if I'd been a "good girl" – "A sundae on a Sunday!" she'd say, and I'd giggle myself stupid – but that was before Dad starting working a lot, and Mum started writing, and our sundae Sundays became fewer and fewer. So because it's only around the corner, I would go there by myself. Ozzie knew me and my parents by this time, and he and his wife, Nerin, took me into the parlour when my mum couldn't. I would taste delicious spoonfuls of his new inventions,

and tell him if it should be his special – there was always a different special each week. That still goes on now; sometimes the old ones are repeated, but Ozzie still comes up with crazy new concoctions too, and all of us Cathen kids love them.

When I was at the parlour, to pass the time between spoonfuls, I would draw. Ozzie would always have a paper and crayons ready. There was this painting that he had, just the one, of a black woman walking through a whirling circle of multicoloured water towards the sun, the calm sea in front of her, her hair flying back in the breeze. It was so beautiful; I would stare for ages until I couldn't remember what I was looking at.

One day a couple of years ago, I turned up, took my usual space at the gleaming silver serving bar and saw that my favourite picture wasn't there. Ozzie said he had taken it upstairs to his flat above the shop, because it didn't seem right in the parlour any more, and joked that maybe I should paint something to fill its space.

So I did. Only I thought about it, thought about what I would want to look at if I were a teenage kid waiting for ice cream, and a comic strip seemed ideal. And so H'y Girl was born (yes, H'y Girl was me, I wasn't overly imaginative with names back then) – a SuperGirl who liked eating ice cream and fighting crime (obviously not at the same time, she's not THAT super). I showed it to Ozzie, who LOVED it, and we printed it up big and stuck it in the water woman's place and it pretty much instantly became a hit.

So I began to draw one every few months, and when I met my best friend, Wes (and the Adventures of H'y Girl and Lameboy

started), I'd do one every few weeks, and Ozzie would display them proudly, not just on one wall, but all of them. People would say: "Ozzie, the cartoons are so cool, who did them?" and he'd reply by pointing at me and saying, "Our very own comic book kid!", and so it stuck. In Cathen Town I am just the Comic Book Kid, and nothing more.

Jonah Jones, however, is a god.

"C'mon, let me help you up. . ."

Once again his amazing hands picked me up and helped me to my feet. I drew it out as long as possible to keep him close. I know I sound a bit full on but seriously, that's how gorgeous he was – I wanted him close all the time, especially since he kissed me at the last gig. . .

I got to my feet gingerly and touched my head. It was banging like a church bell too early on a Sunday morning but I smiled anyway, just because Jonah was smiling at me. I looked down at the mess I had made of the carrot box and apple shelf and felt a pink rush to my cheeks. I wish I didn't blush so much.

"Sorry for making a mess," I apologized. "I'm not usually so . . . clumsy! Do you want me to help clear it up?"

His eyes flicked over the damage my head had done.

"Nah, don't worry, it'll give me something to do later. This place gets deader than a morgue later on, and if I have nothing to do, the old dears make me mop."

He nodded over to the two grannies with matching blue rinses at the tills. They were tutting and whispering in my direction. Oh, great, just what I needed – tutting geriatrics on my tail.

"So," Jonah said, looking straight at me. "What've you been up to? Haven't really seen you since the gig. . ."

The gig where we had that really, *really* amazing kiss, I gave you my number and you didn't text or call or anything?!

". . . yeah, I lost your number and haven't really seen you around."

So that's why he didn't text.

This glimmer of hope at the end of what seemed like a long, earthy tunnel, made my insides lurch. But I decided to play it cool. I wasn't going to get him by letting him know I'd been sat around, waiting for a text from him to say that he wants me to be his one and only girlfriend and that he thinks I'm the most gorgeous girl in school. No, I had to be the Ice Maiden. Ice Queen. Think mean; aloof.

"Oh, the gig. Yeah. Completely forgot about that! I've been so busy, like, doing homework –" I inwardly cringed "– and baby sitting –" It got worse "– and, errm, just doing some shifts at Ozzie's. . ." Oh, my sparkling social life! ". . .to get the money for my MSR ticket."

That last bit sounded better, like I was some kind of martyr for music. He smiled and my knees went weak. I casually leant against the wall to prop myself up a little, but he didn't seem to notice.

"You're going to Midsummer Rave?" he asked, interested. I nodded. His smile widened. "Me too. My dad got me a ticket for my birthday. I went last year and that was awesome. But its going to be pretty good this year, you know, with Cubical and The Dandys . . . and did you hear that at midnight—"

"The Faeries are doing their set?" I smiled then. Of course I knew that. You won't find a bigger Faeries fan than me. Well, except Wes. I think we almost class as stalkers.

"Oh yeah, I forgot that you're their number one fan," he smirked. "I suppose you're going with Wes, Sloaney and Crony?"

Margo "Sloaney" Stone (Wes's twin) and her boyfriend, Finn (yes, her "Crony"), are coming with me and Wes to the Rave. We've got a four-man tent and we're sharing it. It's only two nights, so I don't have to put up with her annoying elocution for too long. It's a wonder that Wes has turned out like he has, coming from his family. "Sloaney" doesn't even cover it.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, we're sharing with them, but don't call them that, they're not *that* bad. . ."

He raised his eyebrows as if to say "Yeah, right!" and carried on. "I don't know where I'm staying yet, but if you're going, maybe I'll see you there. . .?"

His eyes were magical. Like they seriously just cast a spell on me. I swear if he asked me to do the mopping for him I would do it in a second – just find me a mop! So of course I said:

"Yeah, definitely! Be there or be square!"

I just shouldn't speak to human beings.

He chuckled, bemused, as if he didn't know what to say. I wasn't surprised; I couldn't think of what to say to that either. No one has said that phrase seriously for about thirty years. This is what those eyes do to me! It was time to make a swift exit.

I leaned away from the wall and flashed him my best smile. "Well, I've got to go! See you later."

I bent down, picked up my bag from the rubble of carrots and headed for the door.

"Wait—"

I turned around slowly.

"Do I get your number then?"

My head exploded once again, this time definitely with pleasure. Pulse racing? Check. Vision swimming? Check. Head pounding? Check, check, check.

So I gave him my number before I passed out, and headed for the door.

"So I guess I'll see you around!" he called after me.

I nodded. "See you at school."

"Yeah," he grinned, those green eyes wrinkling at the corners when he smiled. "Be there or be square. . ."

I smiled, turned out of the door into the summer heat of the street and let my smile drop into a wince. What was my mind thinking and where did it go?! As I started walking down the street towards Ozzie's, I pulled my phone out of my bag and hit speed dial one.

"Yes, Hols?"

"Ozzie's. Chocolate. Ice cream. Now."

"Give me ten minutes and I'm all yours."

That's why Wes is the best friend I've ever had.

2

Not many people know that Wes's real name is actually Winston. Winston Edward Stone, named after a prime minister, then a monarch, then his generations-old name that screams money in this town. The Stone Manor is the other side of town from us, on the richest street in Cathen town. When Mum found out that was where he lived, she laughed in disbelief.

"Wes lives on Millionare's Row? *Our* Wes?"

Its true; to look at him, you wouldn't think he was loaded. I mean, he doesn't exactly flaunt it like those rich Cali kids on *The O.C.* – just regular jeans, shirts, a messenger bag. But when you get a bit closer you can see the little things: that his cute, square glasses are actually Armani, that he uses some amazing

French scent that's really light and clean-smelling, and that his hair, however much he tries to mess it up, is cut by Toni and Guy. *The* Toni and Guy – they take it in turns. Yes, this boy is loaded, but he doesn't act like it. Like, he chose to come to Cathen Comp instead of a posh-lads' school, because he didn't want to "play 'rugger' all day and come home with a posh accent", and he dresses from the high street like any other guy our age, even though his mother plies him with designer shirts and chinos every week. And you can hold many a conversation with him and never once will you see that he already has about three times the amount of money that I will ever have in my life. He's just a normal, down to earth, nice guy. Who likes music.

Music is how we met – we chose to carry on music in our third year and just happened to be put next to each other in our class. Just before class started I was sat with my headphones in, listening to my favourite song – "Love in Idleness" by The Faeries – full blast; he happened to catch the beat and started tapping along to it. When it got to the chorus and we started singing simultaneously, each of us knew that the other was a friend for life.

Now, almost two years on, he's still my best friend. I don't know what I would do without him, to be perfectly honest. Which is why I was sat at the shiny bar of Ozzie's heaving parlour, waiting for him to sort me out and help me eat some pretty fantastic ice cream.

"Beautiful Holly, how can Uncle Ozzie help you out today, eh?" Ozzie's Turkish accent hasn't left him, even though he's been living here longer than I've been alive. He's a pretty

amazing guy – speaks four languages fluently, a few conversationally, owns his own business, has a lovely wife (who makes the best Turkish food ever!) and also, he looks out for me and Mum. It's like having an uncle just around the corner.

"Ohh, I don't know – what's the new special?" I asked, scanning the various flavours in front of me.

He smiled wickedly. "It's your favourite. . ."

"Butterscotch and Malteaser?!"

"How big?" he laughed, heading for the cupboard.

"Wes is coming in a minute, so make it a large," I smiled, watching him take a huge bowl from the cupboard. He started to scoop large spoonfuls out of the vat of ice cream before him, and looked me straight in the eyes.

"Ahh, Mister Stone is coming!" I knew what was coming after this. He says it every time I come here. "So when are you and him finally going to get together, eh?"

I rolled my eyes, but laughed too. "How many times, Ozzie – he's my best friend! It's a no-go!"

He put down his spoon and pointed at the nearest cartoon strip of "H'y Girl and Lameboy", a particular favourite of mine where the superheroes have a dance-off against the cast of *High School Musical*, who have become quite evil. He stared at the poster, then cast his glance to me. "I don't believe it!" he cried. He shook his head, looking back down at his ice cream, ladling another spoonful into the bowl. "You kids are crazy; you don't even see what is right in front of your eyes! But then *love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind* – so if you say it's a 'no-go', then I cannot argue, eh?"

He chuckled as he went over to the sprinkle station and covered my serving with thick chocolate fudge sauce and then multicoloured sprinkles. I was so busy drooling rather attractively that I hardly noticed Wes saunter into the parlour. He was wearing his favourite shirt – a blue tee with the legend "Goodfellow is my God" across the back – his dark hair styled "to look messy". I don't really understand why boys do that. Why can't they just go with the fluffy, rolled-out-of-bed look? Wes says that he doesn't like it, but it looks so soft and cute without product. I'm probably the only person to ever see his hair like that; he never goes out without styling first. He's more of a chick than I am. In his tattered jeans and flip-flops, he sat down in the chair next to me, eyed the bowl of gooey mess that had just been set before me, and then beamed at our dealer.

"Butterscotch and malteaser – Ozzie, you ledge!" Ozzie laughed as Wes grabbed a spoon and took a bite, then grinned and gave Ozzie two thumbs up and continued to shovel his face full of ice cream. What an attractive boy.

"So," he declared, with a mouth full of fudge sauce, "what's going on, H?"

Ozzie turned away to serve another customer in the long queue of impatient teens waiting for a fix of his lush frozen ambrosia, and I turned to my friend and pushed aside my fringe.

"Do I have a bruise coming?" I asked, and Wes put down his spoon to have a look.

"No," he said after a quick inspection. "Not yet. Why?"

I picked up my spoon and tucked in before starting my most current tale of embarrassment and woe.

"Well, I just went to the greengrocers' –"

"– oooh, for the first time since –"

"– the gig, yeah. And so I went in, because I thought everything was clear and that he wasn't working; so I bent down to root around the carrots –"

"– *nice* –"

"And then I heard this voice, all deep and gorgeous, saying, 'Well, if it isn't Little Miss Hockers' and I nearly died – there I was bending over a pile of old carrots, my big bum waving around in the air –"

"– it's not *that* big –"

"Oh, cheers!" I laughed, and he laughed too, his nose wrinkling as he chuckled. "Well, my rear, however big, was waving around and he scared me so much that I fell flat into the tub of carrots, and then when I tried to stand up and got hit by a face in the shelf – I mean shelf in the face—" By this time Wes was hooting with laughter like a small owl, and I had to give him a small shove on the shoulder, because his giggles were making me giggle, and turning my tragedy into a comedy. "And it was just so embarrassing that I had to get out of there quick as a cat, without any carrots, and then I rang you. . ."

"Oh dear," he sighed, shaking his head through subsiding chuckles, then his conker-coloured eyes met mine as he ate the luscious dessert. "Not a good day for Cathen's leading superhero, eh?" I shook my head, carefully touching the point where my head had nearly split in two, and helped myself to some more ice cream. We're so greedy; the bowl was nearly finished.

"No," I agreed. "Getting publicly humiliated? Bad times. But the hottest guy in school –" Wes uttered a sarcastic, pointed cough. "– asking for my number again after said public humiliation? Good times!"

"He didn't say that he lost your number, did he?" Wes asked sardonically. I didn't say anything and looked at the floor. "Hols, that's the oldest line in the book! I'm telling you, he's not good enough for you; the guy's a sleaze."

I frowned. "He might have actually lost my number, you know. Don't be so cynical! And don't ruin this for me; you know I've liked him for ages!"

Wes rolled his eyes. "Only because 'he's just *so* gorgeous!' – and you call me superficial?"

"You're just jealous!" I declared, nicking the last bit of ice cream from the bowl. "Anyway, he said he's going to MSR, so even if he doesn't call I'll see him there!" I pushed the spoon around the bowl, preparing to tell Wes about my plan. "He also said that he didn't have a tent to stay in for the weekend. . ."

I bit my lip and waited for Wes to respond. After a few seconds he looked up, saw my face, and realized what I was asking. "You've got to be joking! Hols, I can't stand the guy for a double maths, let alone two nights." I pouted, doing my best wounded-puppy face, but it's kind of lost its effect after two years. He shook his head. "Sorry, Comic Book Kid, but you'll have to woo and win him some other way. . ."

I carried on pouting. "Fine, be like that. But if it was the other way around I would have said yes!"

"No, you wouldn't. And besides, it would never be the other way around; I prefer the tall, blonde and beautiful type."

I laughed. "Whatever, Winston. It was worth asking. But if a beautiful girl did walk in here right now, and you totally fell for her, I would ask her myself to share our tent."

Wes was staring straight over my shoulder towards the door with a glazed expression.

"It makes me feel so loved when you don't listen to a word I say. . ."

Wes's eyes clicked back up to mine.

"Her."

"What?" I said, totally baffled.

He nodded to the door, his eyes now fixed back on it. "Her."

I turned in my seat and did a double take. I could have sworn I'd just seen Barbie. I looked again. Yes, I had seen Barbie. Real Life Barbie. Swishy blonde hair, tiny shorts, four-season tan: Barbie.

Barbie took off her shades and looked around the parlour at all the people inside. She saw the bar and walked straight over to it. Swish, swish with her shiny hair. She was pretty tall, too. Well, anything is tall to my measley 5'3", but even by normal standards, this chick was tall.

"It's your turn to be joking, mate," I whispered to Wes, who was still pretty much gaping at The Plastic One as if she were made of gold. "Jeez! Shut your mouth, why don't you? You look like the Channel Tunnel."

He didn't hear me, his eyes fixed on the girl.

"She's coming this way! Act like you're not my girlfriend."

I frowned incredulously. "But I'm *not* your girlfriend!"

Barbie, now at the bar just behind Wes, cast me a strange look, then turned back to the ice cream. She was OK-looking up close. Well, actually, she was pretty much ten million times better than OK-looking. Surprise surprise, she had bright blue eyes and really white teeth. She was like a perfect advertisement for Sweden, so I was mildly surprised when a wholly different accent came out of her mouth.

"Hi, do you, like, have any sorbets, or frozen yoghurt?"

I felt like shouting, "It's 'yog-urt' for one, not 'youh-guurrt'; and no, this is an *ice cream* parlour, we do ice cream!", but I kept my mouth shut. I often get angry at people who are prettier than me, but it's not their fault, so I just have to be bitter and hostile inside instead, and come across as a nice, non-shallow person to everyone not inside my head.

Ozzie smiled at her and shook his head. "I am very sorry, we have not any frozen yoghurt, only sorbet in the corner."

Barbie smiled her (100-watt) smile, thanked Ozzie (who winked at the awestruck Wes, then went back to serving), and wandered over to the far end of the freezer-server to have a look at the flavours. Wes turned around to have another look, then turned back to me with an expression on his face that just said, "Hamana!": meaning, "Man, that girl is hot; I would!"

As Wes looked like he was so in awe he wouldn't speak for a good few minutes, I thought it best to ask him nod/shake questions.

"You like?"

Nod.