



Green Fairy
AND
THE STALKER GIRL

by
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Green Fairy and the Stalker Girl

by Alessa

I could tell my high school life was going to be a real roller coaster ride. Not a dull moment in a single day, nope.

After all, it's hard to feel bored when you've taken up stalking as a hobby.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I wasn't one of those girls you'd see hiding in trees, or camping on lawns, or sneaking into houses to steal the boxers of the guys they're 'in love' with. Of course not! Gosh, I had way more ulterior motives than to sneak up on guys.

But first things first. To understand why I took up stalking as a hobby, you have to understand the position I found myself in one day when I realised, to my infinite bewilderment, that I preferred staring at girls as opposed to guys, like most of my female friends were doing. It wouldn't be exactly an insurmountable obstacle of infinite shame and disgrace if I wasn't condemned to this hell-shack of a high school, where even small things like an untied shoelace could lead to weeks of Byzantine torments.

This is where the object of my stalking prowess came in. She was the only girl in this high school of morons and unrepentant conformists, brave enough to flaunt her gayness in front of everybody with the power of the double rainbow that stretched from Disneyland to the Moon and back. Her name was unknown to me at that time, as was everything else, on account of her being in her senior year and me being a dorky seventh grader with an admirable case of insecurity.

And so, when there was nothing more to be done but to disgrace oneself by stooping down to the level of a caveman hunting a mammoth, my ulterior motives and subtleness of stalking came into play.

Because, let's face it, when you can't have the girl of your dreams, you better stalk her sweet butt until you know every minute detail of her unattainable life.

But I guess I hadn't been subtle enough, because my proverbial mammoth was currently staring at me across the room. And, well, would you look at that! Was she *laughing* at me?

Though she did look really good when she was this happy. She was one of those girls who only looked slightly better-than-average with a straight face, but when she smiled—wham! It was like a mammoth stomped all over you or a sledgehammer swung down out of nowhere and hit you right in the heart.

For me, anyway. But enough about mammoths and sledgehammers.

Let me tell you about her eyes, because she had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. Honest to God, they were this beautiful shade of sea green that I could see from *miles* away.

Alright, so that was an exaggeration. More like just half a room away. Their greenness was still unbelievably striking, though. That, coupled with the way her entire face lit up when she laughed, was almost enough to pull me across the room, place myself next to her, and introduce myself.

Just almost, mind you.

I wasn't *that* crazy yet!

I looked at her again. She'd stopped laughing and was instead focused on something her friend was telling her. The leftover remnants of a smile were still playing on her lips. I was probably staring a little too hard, because when her eyes suddenly flickered to the side, they caught mine. I froze under the onslaught of that green gaze, and she grinned.

This girl was enjoying my admiration a little too much. Still, I supposed she looked good enough to warrant such a healthy ego. Her eyes were so... *green*. I hoped that was her real eye colour, because if it wasn't, I was going to be so pissed.

Considering how I had already decided to nickname her Green Fairy, and I swear it had nothing to do with *la fée verte*, although she hit like Absinthe every time I drank her with my eyes.

Speaking of whom, she had turned back to her friend while I was still pondering the intricate mysteries of her eyes. She was *so* not interested. If she had been, she would've come over to introduce herself already. Not that I'd expected her to. I was just having fun admiring her beautiful eyes. That was all.

"Gah," I said, mostly to myself, because, let's face it, the only reason I was sitting in the cafeteria checking out cute blond-haired, green-eyed girls was because I was eating my lunch alone. Who eats their lunch *alone* in high school? Actually, don't answer that. The main question was not why I *ate* alone, but why I was *still* alone.

Maybe it was the rabid stalker gaze I was fixing on Green Fairy. I was scaring people off.

A diagnosis was the first step to finding a cure for the sickness. Or, in my case, the solution to my loneliness. But first, I needed a drink.

A couple of Absinthe shots later—okay, I lied, I only had *one* measly sip of apple juice—I was living it up as the centre of attention in the high school cafeteria. Alright, so that wasn't really true. I had a tendency to make myself sound a lot more exciting than I really was. Still, I had the best intentions.

Maybe it was fate, maybe it was pure coincidence, but after I had finished my stale sandwich, I stepped out to get some fresh air, just in time to catch Green Fairy heading off with her friend.

It was definitely my overactive imagination or an early onset of criminal insanity taking power over me, because I wouldn't have done something like that if I'd been a normal, sane girl.

I followed her home.

That sounds wrong. No, I didn't so much as "follow" her as I *stalked* her home. On the whole journey there, I was ten paces behind her and her friend.

Whenever one of them glanced back, I would hide myself behind the nearest lamppost or telephone pole. In my overexcited state, I figured I was doing a pretty good job of hiding myself from them. The truth is, they probably knew exactly what I was doing the entire time. Even so, they made no move to stop me.

I probably puffed up Green Fairy's ego rather nicely that day.

They let me follow them as far as the main entrance of a two-story townhouse. In retrospect, it was a good thing that I chose to follow them rather than anybody else, because I ended up fairly close to my own home. Not that I'd realised that then. I was too busy trying to keep upright and in the shadows while watching the two of them enter the house.

There was the sound of the metal gate opening, and I was mentally congratulating myself on a stalk well done when something happened to send my satisfaction down the drain. Green Fairy paused in the act of walking just long enough to turn back and shout, "Bye!" Then, with a flash of the smile I was coming to associate with her, she was gone. The gate clanged shut, but I could still hear the sound of their laughter coming from within the house.

Sobering up all of a sudden, I sank to the ground. Well. Gosh. That was embarrassing. I was never going to be smitten by another girl, not if it drove me to do stupid things like follow her back home. Hopefully, I was never going to see her again. The school campus was huge, after all. What were the odds?



As it turned out, the odds were indeed very much against me.

For some reason, Green Fairy started popping up *everywhere* I went. I saw her on my way to classes. I saw her on my way back from classes. I saw her on the school playground, in the cafeteria, on the bus... Everywhere.

And every time my eyes met hers—by accident, I swear, by *accident*—she would smile at me, as if she thought I was stalking her and was amused by it.

When I told my best friend Polly about the girl and my stalking experience that first day, her reaction wasn't what I'd been expecting.

"What kind of stalker are you," she demanded, "to not even have a picture of her!?"

This just goes to show that you never really know a person, even after five years of friendship.

I stared at her. I'd been expecting an eye roll at the very least and an outright lecture on how stalking was for desperate girls who couldn't get a date with a *guy*. Not... *this*.

"What?" She shrugged, "You've got me curious! I didn't know you were... *that way*."

"What way?" I felt the need for her to clarify the statement.

"Ugh... The girl-stalker way?"

"But you don't know why I was stalking her. Maybe I wanted to drink her blood. Maybe I'm just a vampire fighting to survive in this world," I grasped for an alternative explanation to my insanity.

And here came the familiar eye roll. Finally. I was just starting to worry that my best friend's brain had been eaten by an alien. "Now you're just being ridiculous," she sighed.

"I'm serious!" I insisted, resisting the temptation to stomp my foot, further proving my point. "You don't know why I was stalking her."

She looked half-amused, half-irritated. "I'm not interested in why you stalked her, Airi! I'm just curious as to what kind of girl it takes to have someone like you in such a twist."

"Oh. Good." I was basking in satisfaction that my best friend wasn't interested in my disgraceful accomplishments as a stalker until I picked up on what she'd said. I scowled. "What do you mean, someone like *me*?"

She smirked. "Nothing. It's just that you have such high standards, I was beginning to think you were never going to fall in love!"

I threw a pillow at her. Trust my best friend to make my lewd interest in another girl sound like an outstanding achievement!



It probably wouldn't have gotten much further than that if it hadn't been for the Bus Incident. Even though that was the name I christened it with, the Bus Incident really had very little to do with buses of any sort. I only call it *The Bus Incident* because it happened thanks to the school bus. Sort of.

See, I'd been waving to one of my friends aboard the shuttle bus driving by and walking backwards when I'd run straight into a warm body.

Imagine my surprise when I turned around, apologies on my tongue, only to come face-to-face with none other than Green Fairy.

She looked at me and did a double-take. "Oh, God," she said. "You're the stalker girl!"

Well, would you look at that? She had a nickname for me too!

"You recognise me?" I said, with a little bit of wonder. Before I realised that I'd all but confessed to stalking her with those three words. Gosh. I should've feigned ignorance and escaped before she hauled me to the nearest police station.

I blamed it on those green eyes of hers. A glance into them, and I would end up doing stupid things.

"Who wouldn't? You're suddenly everywhere I go."

Her expression as she looked down on me from her lofty height was a mixture of a smile and a frown. It was like her facial muscles couldn't agree on what they wanted to do. Which was really a waste, because when they weren't disagreeing like this, her features made quite a pleasing picture. Although those freckles on her nose were nothing but pure attention-seeking. But she had really cute dimples on her cheeks when she smiled and what seemed to be very kissable lips.

And I realised I'd been staring again with a stupid grin on my face.

"Uh," I said, flustered. She'd been saying something before, hadn't she? "Right. Sorry for running into you like that. And sorry for that... other... day."

She laughed. There went my heart again. Stupid heart. Why do we need it?

I was saved from going into cardiac arrest from prolonged exposure to her smile when she abruptly frowned and dug around in her pocket to fish out her phone. She glanced at the flashing screen and said apologetically to me, "Sorry, but I need to take this."

Belatedly, I realised her phone had been vibrating. She'd put it on silent mode, which explained why I hadn't heard any ringing. I wondered what her ringtone sounded like.

"It's fine," I said, watching as she turned a little away from me to answer her phone. Staring at her back view, I wondered if this was the time to politely make my escape. It wasn't like I needed to stick around.

Wait a minute. Was that... *French*?

All thoughts of escape vanquished, I pounced on her—metaphorically, of course—the moment she hung up.

"Was that French? You speak French? That's so cool!"

"It was German," she said drily.

"Oh," I waved off my mistake. I like German too. And French, and Spanish... She looked a little wary, but I didn't let it get to me. "You speak German? Are you German?"

"I'm half-German," she divulged, smiling just the slightest bit. I could tell she didn't want to stand here and continue listening to some crazy kid's chatter, but manners prevented her from walking away. Aww... Must've been European blood in her.

"Really? I'm half-Japanese," I said proudly, then paused. Half-Japanese didn't sound as cool as half-German did. Huh.

"Really?" She was frowning a little bit now, looking sceptically at my almost-black hair and almost-black eyes. I decided I didn't like it when she frowned. "Are you sure you aren't the whole thing?"

"No! I have an English last name, see?"

"I don't see," she said slowly when I didn't further elaborate.

"Caswell," I revealed, and stood beaming up at her.

"Right. And your name is?"

"Airi."

"Airi Caswell?" She raised an eyebrow, but she was smiling again. I guess my name did sound quite odd when put together.

"My full name's Emmeline Airi Caswell," I said. "Emmeline sounds much better, don't you think? But Emmeline is such an elegant name, it doesn't suit me at all. I want a name that's lively, fun, and spontaneous! So I go by Airi."

"And Airi is such an exciting name?"

I pondered that. "Actually, the name Airi is my Japanese name. My Mom gave it to me. It means love and jasmine, or one who loves jasmine. It has a breezy feel to it because it kinda sounds like airy or fairy."

She looked bemusedly exasperated. "You..." she closed her eyes briefly, as if trying to dredge out that elusive word from the back of her mind, and settled on, "are confusing."

"And you really have the most amazing eyes I've ever seen," I said.

Oops. There goes my hyperactive mouth again.

She was smiling, though. The way one smiles politely at an annoying little kid. I suppose she found my obsession with her—with her *eyes*, somewhat—bemusing. "Thanks," she said, her eyes dancing when I looked into them.

Without quite knowing how, we found ourselves heading to the nearest bus stop, where we spent the next hour sitting on the bench and getting to know each other. I found out that she was in her senior year, a guitar player in a band, and one of the nicest girls I'd ever had the fortune of meeting.

"I have to go," she said eventually. "I have a band practise at four."

"What do you mean at fo—Oh crap! It's four!" I scrambled for my bag. "I have to feed my pet hamster, or he'll eat the cat."

She grinned, and I'd come to realise she smiled a lot. "You're a crazy kid, you know that?" She stood up along with me, flicking a cursory glance over the textbook I'd taken out. It'd been weighing down my bag! It wasn't like I was trying to look studious or anything so that she wouldn't think I was only good at stalking. "Psychology 101?"

"It gives me an excuse to do crazy things," I said cheekily.

She raised her eyebrows. "Like stalking people you've just met?"

I lifted my chin. "I could say it was an experiment for my social studies class assignment."

She laughed. "You could."

Hugging the book to myself, I adjusted the strap of my bag, and hesitated. "So... will you be here again tomorrow?"

She eyed me suspiciously, even though the impact of it was reduced by a smile twitching in the corner of her lips. "Why? Are you going to conduct your 'social experiment' on me again?"

I grinned. "Maybe."

I was kidding, of course. Really, I was! Sort of. Probably. Maybe.



She was there again the next day. And the day after that. Not on Friday, though; she told me on our Thursday meeting that her Friday schedule was so packed, it was insane. And of course, she was never free after six at night. I had a feeling she led a life much more exciting than mine. She was always out with her friends.

But she didn't seem to mind that I was monopolising a little bit of her time almost every day. It wasn't much—on Mondays, when our schedules clashed horribly, we only had time for a hi-bye sort of passing greeting—but to me, it was enough. I did wonder why she was willing to take the time out to talk to someone she considered a kid and a stalker, but she never brought up the topic.

I really didn't want to know if it turned out that she was conducting a social experiment of her own on me.

On our third meet-up, I realised we'd never formally introduced ourselves to each other. When I reminded her that she knew my name, but I was still in the dark about her own, she quickly extended her hand in my direction. "Nice to meet you, Airi. I'm Mona."

"Well, that's quite formal," I mused, shaking her hand. "Is it Mona as in Mona Lisa?"

She giggled. "Are you flirting with me, Airi?"

"No..." Oh gosh, be still, my heart. "I mean, I was just curious, you know... I don't have any experience talking to pretty girls, and..." What the hell was I talking about? Shut up, shut up, shut up...

To my relief, Mona laughed it off. "It's short for Simone, but most people first think of the Mona Lisa when they hear it."

Well, that was close. I tried to appear calm and collected, but on the inside I was triumphant for having discovered one more detail about Green Fairy.

Two weeks after we'd first started talking to each other, I walked into the small ice cream shop on the periphery of our school building, only to be greeted with a "Stalked anyone else today?"

She grinned at me as I sat down at the table. It'd become something of a joke between us.

I raised my eyebrows in response to her greeting. "Of course! There was this girl with purple hair and another one with the most gorgeous shoes ever. You're lucky I even managed to fit you in."

Mona feigned hurt. "So I'm just another appointment to you?"

"Shh!" I widened my eyes, glancing from side to side as if to check for eavesdroppers. Then I lowered my voice and leaned in, "You're not supposed to know."

She laughed out loud. "You're nuts, you know that?"

"That's what my friend Polly tells me all the time."

"And she's right about it," Mona nodded wisely.

Half an hour and a cup of strawberry ice cream later, I was feeling re-energised. Looking into her eyes for thirty minutes straight had nothing to do with it. I swear!

"I don't know why people always say Asians have creaseless eyelids. *I* have creases in *my* eyelids. And we don't have slits for eyes, either!" I locked my eyes with hers to prove the point. But gosh, the greenness of her eyes was so distracting.

Alright, maybe I'd just been searching for an excuse to stare into her eyes.

"You're half-Asian, aren't you? Maybe you don't count."

I was indignant. "I do count! I look more like my Mom than my Dad, anyway." I paused, then thought of something else to raise as evidence, "And Mom has creases in her eyelids too! She's from Yokohama, and about eighty percent of the people there—and they're *fully* Asian—have creased eyelids. And I've been there—they really do!"

There was a little silence as she digested what I'd just said. I hoped she wasn't one of the people who subscribed to such stereotypes. I don't assume every German has blue eyes, do I?

"Alright," Mona said after a while, "and remind me why we're talking about eyelid creases again?"

I frowned, trying to recall. "I think it started with me complimenting your eyes."

A corner of her mouth tilted upward. "As usual."

"Then I started complaining about my boring brown eyes."

"They're not boring," she interjected. I knew she was just being nice.

"They're so dark, they look black!" I grumbled. "Black's boring."

"They're so dark, I can see myself in them." She looked straight into my eyes and smirked. "*That's* interesting."

I started laughing. "You narcissist!"

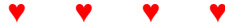
We stared at each other, smiling.

"We digressed again," I realised.

Mona lounged back in her seat, raising her water bottle to her lips before she remembered that it was empty. It had been empty for a while. I smothered a giggle. "We have the craziest conversations," she said.

"That's why being with me is so much fun," I grinned at her.

She laughed but didn't dispute my claim or call me nuts.



By the fourth week, we'd gotten close enough for her to share her troubles with me.

Or rather, her troubles with one girl in particular.

In chick flicks, this would be the part where a boy confesses his love for a girl by referring to a hypothetical mystery girl. The girl would get jealous and upset until the boy revealed that she was the one he'd been talking about all along.

Maybe it was idealistic, but a part of me was excited by the possibility of Mona's mystery girl being myself when she first started talking about her, but then I reminded myself that this wasn't a chick flick and she wasn't a boy.

"So... There's this girl." Mona was staring into the distance, smiling a little.

"You like girls?" I teased, pretending to be clueless.

She laughed. "Am I supposed to believe you're surprised by it?"

"Nothing wrong with homosexuality," I said.

"Nothing at all," she agreed, "but I don't want to give you the wrong impression."

I frowned, disappointed. "Do I look like a guy to you?"

She swept an exaggerated gaze over me, "Hmm..."

I giggled. "Asshole."

She laughed, but I could tell she was itching to go back to the original topic. I decided to help her out.

"So... about this girl..."

"Yeah." Her cheeks looked a little red. "So... well... There's this girl I like."

"Yeah?" I tried to look casual. I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

"She's beautiful... and generous... and funny, and... I... Sometimes I feel like she's too good for me." As I gaped at her, she cleared her throat and tried to regain her confidence. "I mean, she's hot. I want to... you know."

Wow. She was so in over her head.

Mona straightened up suddenly. "I've never told anyone else about this. My friends would laugh their asses off if they found out I'm being such a wimp over a girl."

"No worries," I drawled, "Aunt Airi is here to help."

She chuckled a little. "Okay, so she's awesome, and I want to ask her out. But it's gonna screw up our friendship if she doesn't feel the same way, you know? So... yeah... I don't know."

"So you want to know if she's gay?"

"Something like that. Yeah."

"That's easy," I said. "Just ask her straight out! How could anyone resist your charm?"

Mona looked worried. "And if she doesn't feel the same way?"

"She will," I said confidently.

She smiled. "And you're so sure how?"

I shrugged, unwilling to make the first move. "Of course, there's always a risk involved. But if you don't take that risk, you're never going to know, right? I guess the question you have to ask yourself is, is she worth taking that risk?"

She stared at me for a long moment before a grin spread across her face. "Yeah. I guess you're right."

I laughed. "Aren't you proud of taking love advice from a thirteen-year-old girl?"

She nudged me playfully. "Hey, age is just a number, right? Ice cream's on me this time."

I pretended to bat my eyelashes at her. "Gosh. I need to counsel you more often, then."

She acted offended. "I do *not* need counselling!"

"So she says," I said in an undertone.

Mona flicked an empty paper cup at me. "I heard that."

This led us on another one of our tangents. But I couldn't stop wondering what I'd done wrong. Hadn't I given her enough openings?

Or maybe, as I admitted to myself with a sinking feeling, the hypothetical mystery girl in this case wasn't so hypothetical after all and was indeed so alluring that one dorky little kid couldn't possibly compete with her.



When I showed up for our usual meet-up the following Thursday, there was a girl sitting at the table with her. As I slowly walked towards them, I observed that Mona's entire body was turned towards the girl, and her whole face was lit up.

An inexplicable heaviness was building up at the back of my throat.

I was about two steps away from them when she finally looked up and noticed me. "Hey, you're here!" Mona grinned, and I couldn't help feeling a flash of resentment for this redhead bombshell beside her who could make her smile so giddily.

"Hi, Mona," I said as the two of them moved closer to accommodate my arrival. The girl smiled shyly at me. I stared at Mona, willing her to get on with the introductions. I would say 'hi' politely, smile at them, and, after an appropriate amount of time, calmly leave.

"Maddie, this is Airi; she's..." Mona trailed off, as if she had no idea how to categorise me. And I admit, it hurt. Even the label 'friend' – heck, even 'a stalker I've been talking to for five weeks now' – would've been better than nothing.

I smiled brightly at Maddie. "I'm the girl who stalks her because of her pretty green eyes."

Maddie looked slightly confused, but she smiled back. "Nice to meet you, Airi."

"Right," Mona cleared her throat, cutting in before I could confuse the poor girl even more. "Stalker Girl, this is Madison—or Maddie, really. She's... she's the one I've been telling you about." Her gaze was so bright and hopeful, willing me to make the connection.

And I did.

I think that was the moment I felt that little bit of hope in my chest shrivel up and die. Obviously, I'd been thinking too highly of myself. Gosh! Imagine fantasising about being the girl she was head over heels for—what were the chances of *that* happening, right?

I looked at Maddie again. She was beautiful—taller than me, older than me, a redhead—and she seemed really nice. Gosh. She was exactly the kind of girl Mona would fall in love with. Looking at them sitting side by side, you could tell they were *made* for each other. She was eye to eye with Mona—the perfect height to lean against her for a kiss or whatever else couples liked to do. She was perfect for Mona. Not to mention, she was probably halfway in love with her already. I couldn't get in the way of that.

Not that I would even *want* to. I mean, the only reason I started the whole stalking business was because I was attracted to Mona's eyes, right? And there were tonnes of girls in this country with pretty green eyes. No big deal. I could find a replacement stalkee in no time.

"Nice to meet you too, Maddie. Well, I've gotta go. There's a mountain of homework awaiting my... scrutiny..." No, that sounds weird... "Awaiting my attention..." Oh, whatever. I stopped and took a deep

breath. The two of them were staring at me as if I'd suddenly sprouted antennae. Mona was opening her mouth to say something, but I overrode her when I said as cheerily as possible, "Guess I'll see the two of you around!"

Then I turned on my heel and ran.

Coward.



I should've known Mona would track me down eventually. She was persistent like that. I'd been trying to avoid her for the past five days and was, for the moment, quite successful in my endeavours. Until she appeared out of nowhere while I was heading for the fifth period math class.

I mentally cursed my past self for letting her know my daily schedule.

"God, you are one hard kid to track down. Where have you been for the past week?"

"I'm not a kid. I don't bleat," I mumbled lamely, trying to walk past her so that I could continue on my merry way. "Hey, can we have this conversation later?" Try never. "I have a class to get to."

"What's wrong, Airi?" Before I knew it, she had placed herself squarely in my path. And, dare I say it, she actually sounded a little angry and hurt. "Why are you not stalking me anymore?"

I was trying my hardest not to look up into her eyes. They would hypnotise me, I knew as much. I laughed, but it came out sounding a little false. "I'm not sure your girlfriend would be too pleased about that."

"What?" Mona sounded a little confused now. "I really don't think Maddie would mind. She knows we're just friends."

Oh. "Con- congratulations," I managed to choke out in a fairly normal voice. "Guess you finally asked her, huh?"

"Yeah." Her tone had lightened considerably. I could tell she was smiling. Just the *thought* of Maddie made her smile. Man, this girl was good. "Thanks for that, by the way. You really kicked my ass into action," she laughed.

I bit my lip so hard I was sure there'd be teeth imprints by the time I stopped. Here I was, head bowed and battling tears, and she had the nerve to *thank* me for her successful relationship?

At that moment, I hated her so damn much.

"You're welcome," I said with a lump in my throat, and tried to push past her again.

"Hey, what's the rush?" She grabbed me by the wrist, stopping my escape. "What's wrong, Airi? I just gave you the go-ahead for stalking me."

Gosh, why was she so persistent? Did my stalking give her an ego boost or something? Was that why she wanted to keep me around? So that I could pump up her balloon of an ego?

Thanks, but no, thanks.

"Yeah, about that," I said, on a whim, "I've been meaning to tell you. I've found someone else to stalk, so I won't be bothering you anymore."

Mona's grip on me fell away. "What?" Her voice sounded odd all of a sudden.

"Yeah," I made to sound like I was giggling, even though I'd never felt less like it in my entire life. "You mean I forgot to tell you? He has the most amazing—" Oh, gosh, most amazing *what*? I could hardly talk about eyes again. I cast a panicked glance around and spotted some random guy with large white headphones... My saviour. "—headphones! And he's a drummer in a band, isn't that cool?"

There was a small silence, and then, "Oh." The odd note in her voice had been replaced by sizzling anger. "So that's all I am to you? Some girl to entertain you for five, six weeks, until a cooler replacement comes along?"

"Out with the old, in with the new," I said loftily, knowing this would make her go away. And that was what I wanted. Right?

I could literally feel the disgust in Mona's glare. Without another word, she turned and walked away, out of sight and out of my life.

I did an about-turn and went back the way I'd come from. I didn't feel like going to class anymore. I was a little sick from the heat, I supposed. The sun was shining particularly intensely today, after all. It had nothing to do with the crushing sensation in my heart. And the tears spilling down my cheeks were just an early symptom of some kind of heat stroke. I'd be fine after a few hours' rest.

Of course I would.



The Thursday night two weeks later saw me moping around the room watching *Yo-Kai Watch* on my tiny laptop screen and eating strawberry ice cream, the one thing left that reminded me of happier times with Mona.

I would've been content to continue this way for the rest of the year, but Polly was getting frustrated with me. "Oh my God," she said when, slamming into my room unannounced, she caught sight of me sitting morosely on the bed with the ice cream tub beside me. "It's been two *weeks*, Airi! You're ruining your life!"

Moping around the room could hardly be construed as 'ruining my life'. I still made sure I went to school every day and finished my homework on time, after all. I told her as much.

She didn't agree, judging by the way she ignored me and barrelled on. "She's just a girl. Get over her already!"

Someday, I would tell Polly that her consoling skills sucked. Someday.

"But I don't want to get over her!" I wailed dismally, startling both her and myself with the sudden outburst. "I want to get *with* her."

Alright, so I've finally admitted it.

She gave a long-suffering sigh. "Then why on earth did you feed her all that drivel about a guy? For goodness' sake, that made you sound ten kinds of fickle."

"She already has the perfect girlfriend," I muttered.

Polly snorted. "Nobody is perfect."

"Well, she is."

She hit me upside the head with a pillow. "Again, nobody is perfect! And if she would choose another girl over my awesome best friend, then she is an idiot. You're better off without her. You don't want your babies to be mentally challenged, do you?"

I coughed at that. "Whaaa...? Oh my God, you're so lewd!" But I couldn't help cracking a smile. A very small smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Hell, you're right too... Who needs her, anyway?"

But somehow, my heart still wasn't convinced.



It took another month before I could gather enough courage to take my usual route again. It was the route that required me to walk past the familiar two-storey townhouse on the way back home. I'd been taking detours so that I wouldn't have to pass by Mona's block and risk running into her, but it was raining heavily that day, and I didn't have any energy left in me to take the longer route. Besides, I reasoned, the chances of running into her in this rain were close to none. Mona once told me she hated being out in the rain. I could understand why. She was a sunshine kind of girl.

Therefore, I was understandably horrified when I rounded the corner and saw her standing outside the gates of her townhouse. She was by the lamppost I'd hidden behind that very first day I'd followed her back to her home. I was considering ducking back around the corner and heading another way when she turned and caught sight of me.

She made no move to acknowledge my existence; she just stood staring. Hardening myself against the way my heart had started thumping, I put one foot in front of the other until I was an arm's length away from her.

Mona continued to stare, unsmiling.

Well, this was awkward. I winced at the chilly reception I was receiving. I probably deserved it, considering my last words to her.

I would speak to her, I decided, and if she didn't reply, I would leave.

"What are you doing out in the rain like that?"

Her reply was slow in coming, but it came. "Thinking."

I couldn't hide my disbelief. "I thought you hated the rain?"

She stared at me from her lofty height but didn't respond. I shifted awkwardly. "You want my umbrella?"

"No."

"What's with the one-word answers?" It wasn't like her to be so sullen. Against my will, I was starting to worry.

She shrugged.

I couldn't stand this anymore. "Look, I'm sorry for what I said the last time. I didn't mean it. I was just..." I couldn't possibly admit that I had been jealous of Maddie. Mona was suddenly looking at me with more interest than before. I changed the subject.

"How's..." I choked on the next word. Hoping it hadn't been too obvious, I cleared my throat and tried again. "How's Maddie?"

She was silent for so long that I almost thought she wasn't going to reply. Just as I was getting ready to walk off, she said lowly, "We broke up."

I almost fell over in shock. "Oh. I'm sorry." Mona standing out in the rain made sense now. She was probably heartbroken. I felt so bad for her that I couldn't find it in me to feel happy that she was single again.

She was looking at me steadily. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What are you talking about?" What else did she expect me to say? Was she trying to blame her breakup on *me*?

Mona pinched the bridge of her nose. "Never mind. I just thought... you... never mind." She turned away.

I watched her go. Or at least, I thought she was going to leave, but after a couple of steps, she swung back around and fixed me with a blazing glare. She looked like she'd just thought of something that had pissed her off and resolved her determination at the same time.

"You. Listen." She spoke harshly, stabbing a finger in my direction. I stared. Her hair was drenched and hanging limply in her eyes—those beautiful eyes that were now darkened with anger—and she was

apparently about to unleash her full wrath on me, but the only thing I was thinking about at that moment was that she could still make my heart beat faster even when she looked like a drowned rat. And that she was going to catch a cold if she stayed out in the rain like that.

I took a step forward. "You want my umbrella?" I offered again, holding out the said object.

But Mona ignored me. It seemed that whatever she wanted to get off her chest was more important than getting out of the rain. "You," she said again. "You are the total antithesis of my dream girl."

"Did you really just say antithesis?" I asked in an unimpressed way. She would never have guessed that, inside, my heart was breaking all over again. "Methinks someone's taken one too many thesis papers to her head."

"And you say crazy stuff all the *freaking* time," she added, looking at me pointedly. "You are so random. You act like a three-year-old kid. You never stop talking. You drive me *insane*! And you're so fickle—you go around first stalking girls, then stalking guys. You stalk anyone who happens to be attractive enough to catch your interest. Who cares if someone has pretty eyes or amazing headphones? You're so superficial!"

It was like a dam had suddenly burst. The transition from her few-syllabic replies to this stream of accusations was so sudden, it shocked me.

I slowly retracted my hand until the underside of the umbrella was touching the top of my head. I made myself into a human turtle. That way, she wouldn't be able to see how close I was to tears. It was fine if she didn't like me. She didn't have to go all nasty like that.

Maybe I had been superficial and fickle. Maybe I acted like a three-year-old. Maybe I'd only been attracted to her because of her beautiful eyes and brilliant smile—at first. But as the days went by and I got to know more about her, what I fell for was her personality. She could have freakish rainbow-coloured eyes for all I cared—I would still feel the same way about her because it was the girl behind those amazing eyes that I really loved.

I turned around and made to leave. I didn't have to stand here listening to the girl I liked insult me to my face.

"And you're always running away," Mona continued behind me, her voice softening now. "Whenever something bad happens, your only answer is to escape first and think later. When will you stop being a little kid and learn that you can't keep running forever? Maybe if you stick around till the end, for once, something good might happen."

I whirled around, now angry enough to be uncaring of the tears in my eyes. "What the hell!" I shouted at her. "Just because you got dumped doesn't give you the right to come here and lecture me on my flaws! So I'm not perfect like your dream girl? Okay, I'm sorry for that! And I'm sorry for being a kid. I'll leave you alone until I grow up, okay? You won't have to see me ever again!"

She was glaring at me. It seemed to be the only reaction I was capable of getting out of her since I'd run into her that afternoon.

"What the hell are you talking about, Airi?" she snapped. I turned around again, but this time she moved fast enough to push herself in front of me into the small space under my umbrella. Well, not exactly *under*, because she was too tall for it to fit directly over her head.

Even so, she was still close enough to make me freeze up.

"You're running away again," she said in a lower tone of voice. She took the umbrella from me, holding it up higher so that the spokes wouldn't poke her in the eye.

"What are you..."

"I didn't get dumped," she interrupted. I was about to congratulate her and make a run for it when she continued, "I broke up with Maddie."

"Huh?" I croaked. Her steady gaze was freaking me out. "Gosh, there must be something wrong with my hearing, because I could've sworn you just said *you* broke up with Maddie..."

"I did."

"Whaa— *Why*? But you're in love with her!" A train of thought hit me out of the blue, something I had read in some kind of girly magazine, "Is this, like, a thing where you get freaked out when you fall in love with someone? And you have to 'distance yourself' to preserve your independence?" I glared at her. "Well, *don't*! She's the best thing that's ever happened to you! Don't jeopardise your happiness because of something stupid like that."

Because, ultimately, the most important thing was for her to be happy. And Maddie would be perfect for that. I'd seen how Mona could break into a smile simply at the thought of her. Maddie was perfect for her.

Mona looked astonished and slightly horrified. "*What*?"

"Your feelings aren't going to go away even if you run from them, you know," I said.

The glare was back on her face. "I know *that*," she muttered darkly.

"That's why you should go back to her. Tell her you made a mistake, that you can't live without her," I said, nodding wisely.

Her expression darkened further. "Don't go putting words in my mouth, Airi!"

"I know it sounds a little melodramatic, but she'll like that sort of thing," I informed her. "You have to be romantic sometimes. She'll be delighted."

"Okay, how 'bout this?" Mona paused, then took a deep breath and said, "Airi... I made a mistake. I can't live without you." Then she grimaced. "Damn it, there goes my dignity."

I ignored the pang in my heart. "Right. Now replace my name with hers, and you're set." I made to walk past her, but she stopped me by grabbing my wrist with a sigh.

I stopped. Her fingers were ice-cold. She must've been *freezing* out there in the rain.

"For the love of God, Airi, would you just let me finish!" She exclaimed in exasperation. "I broke up with Maddie *one month ago*. I broke up with her, and I have no intention of going back to her." I opened my mouth to argue, but she quelled me with a scowl. "Let me finish! I broke up with her because I discovered too late that I don't feel that way for her anymore. There's someone else I—"

"God, could you be any more fickle?" I cut in, giving her a withering look. "And you have the nerve to lecture me on *my* fickleness?"

Mona gave me a look of irritation. "I can tell you're never going to let me finish what I want to say. So I'll just fast-forward to the end."

"It's not my fault you—"

"Airi Caswell," she said, in a voice that very effectively drowned mine out, "I love you."

Before my brain could even digest the words, I started shaking my head. "No. You can't just change your mind like that."

"Says who?" She sounded disgruntled.

"Says..." I flailed around wildly for an answer and settled for, "It's just common sense!" And when she didn't look the slightest bit convinced by my argument, "She makes you smile!"

Mona looked confused. "What?"

"She makes you smile," I repeated. "I've seen the way you talk about her. Just *thinking* about her makes you smile. She makes you happy! I'm like... the antithesis of your dream girl." That statement of hers still stung, even when I was the one quoting it. "You don't smile at me. You *glare* at me."

She glared again now. "Only because you're being such a perfect little idiot!"

I glared back. "Sorry for being an idiot then! Not everyone can live up to the standards of your dream girl."

Mona ran a palm over her face in desperation, looking like she would like nothing better in the world than to strangle some sense into me. Then she exhaled loudly. Once. Twice. Thrice. The third time was the longest yet.

"Stop sighing!" I snapped. I didn't like it when she looked so obviously frustrated. I also didn't like that I was the reason she was so frustrated.

"If you don't feel the same way, just say so." The confidence she'd had was slowly starting to melt away, and she was gaining a sort of wounded puppy look. It made her look so vulnerable; I would've given anything to get that look out of her eyes.

"I—" I bit my lip, "Dammit, are you *blind*?"

She stared at me. "Does that mean..."

"I've liked you for a long time now," I admitted grudgingly. Gosh. Mushy scenes like these really weren't my cup of tea. I wasn't even completely sure I *liked* tea, come to think of it.

"Stop digressing," Mona said, as if she could read my mind. I was about to ask her when she added, warily, "It's that look on your face."

"Oh. Okay. Wait—I have a *look*?"

"*Stop digressing*," she groaned.

"*Fine*." She didn't have to get all huffy about it.

We stared at each other. I detachedly mused that the rain was easing down.

"Airi, you were confessing your feelings for me?" Mona prompted me after a while, presumably unable to stand my blank stare anymore.

"Uh," I said, "I thought I was *done* with that."

"What?" she asked incredulously. "That was *it*?"

"It was still longer than yours," I pointed out.

"Only because you kept cutting me off!"

"See, you're doing that glaring thing again!"

"Now you're just being ridiculous."

"I am *not*," I muttered mutinously. I glared at the wet ground and at our shoes. She was wearing Converse that were completely drenched. Gosh. I was starting to feel bad now.

She was speaking again. "Now that we've established we both like each other..."

I looked up to see why she'd trailed off, just in time to feel her lips land on mine.

As first kisses go... this was probably the coldest kiss in the history of first kisses. Not in terms of passion but of temperature. Her lips were so cold that when they touched mine, I jumped at the shiver that surged through my body as a result. Then she tangled a hand in my hair and pulled me closer to kiss me properly. I had to stand on my toes to reach her lips, and I forgot about all the cold for a little while.

It wasn't the most passionate, or the most perfect, or the most skilful kiss I'd ever experienced, but being my first kiss from a girl, it was everything I ever wanted. And I'd never understood all that hoo-hah over kissing in the rain; I'd never found it particularly romantic, just very wet and uncomfortable. But this kiss, right here, right now, with the right girl—it surely was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I discovered I was also drenched by the time we both ran out of breath and pulled away. She must have dropped the umbrella at some point. I found that I didn't really care. I would stand out in the rain all day if that was all it took to feel this way, to have her look at me this way all the time.

"So..." I found myself whispering, as if speaking any louder would shatter the perfection of that moment. "Where do we go from here?"

"Let's start from the beginning," Mona suggested. She used her left hand to lift mine and put it into her right. Once her larger hand had closed over my smaller one, she shook it and said, "Nice to meet you, Airi. I'm Mona."

Then she smiled—that brilliant smile that had captured my heart from the very first day. And now, with both of us standing in the rain, frozen to the bone and dripping wet, it still had the ability to warm me to the tips of my toes. Her green eyes were warm—I hadn't known such a cold colour could be so warm—and she said, "I think you're the most amazing girl I've ever met. Will you be my girlfriend?"

As it turned out, she didn't need advice on how to win a girl over, after all.

The End