

Cartoon-Worthy

She was happy.

Yep, sure am. I have friends, family, a few dreams, some food. I'm happy.

Except my boyfriend ripped my heart out and plunged it into the deep, dark ocean. Lost forever. It's probably hitching a ride from a whale if it wasn't eaten by a shark yet.

Maddie Halverson's lips quirked at the image.

Okay, not really.

Sitting down at the vanity table located in the farthest corner of her room, she studied her reflection: long brown hair, big green eyes, full lips and size 32 C breasts.

What is wrong with me? Boys consider me pretty.

Grabbing a brush, intending to work the tangles out of her hair, she managed to knock over a container of loose face powder.

“Shit!” Maddie blew on the spilled powder, sending a cloud into the air. As she brushed her hair she glanced at the clock, whose hands were slowly approaching eleven o'clock. Class was going to start soon. British Romantic Literature, interesting class, but did Maddie do the reading?

Pretty sure not.

And she was going to have to see Donald. Yes, the ex-boyfriend.

I should just continue with the old college tradition of dropping classes. There's always next semester.

Maddie stood up, smoothed her skirt, and pulled the wrinkles out of her shirt. It was a sexy, make-him-wish-he-had-me-outfit.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

Maddie jumped, startled, and knocked over a couple bottles of nail polish. “Shit. Jenna, what do you want? What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“It’s winter. And aren’t you just going to class?” Maddie’s 14-year-old, opinionated sister asked. “Wait...Donald’s in your class, isn’t he? Aren’t you over him yet? I mean, his name is as gay as he is.”

“Please don’t use gay in that way, unless you mean happy, and it’s not that cold out.” Maddie grabbed her backpack and cell phone and headed towards the door.

“Um, yeah...That’s what I mean,” Jenna rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

Maddie brushed past her without comment. She thought it was a great restraint not to snap back or punch Jenna in the arm.

“Have fun trying to win Don-Don back!” Jenna yelled after her.

Maddie scowled over her shoulder at her sister. “Have fun waiting for your boobs to grow in!”

Jenna pouted and yelled after Maddie, “They’re comin’ in. One day! Soon!”

Maddie caught, one-handed, the Frisbee flying towards her and immediately threw it back. “Coming back to you, Hayden!”

They stood in an aisle located in the local health food store, appropriately called Health Food Store. Maddie stood on one end of the tea and coffee aisle and her co-

worker, Hayden Pierce, stood on the other end. It wasn't a large store, just had a few aisles, a cooler section, a freezer section, and one register. It was the evening shift and the workers were the only ones in the store, thus to alleviate the banal night Hayden had introduced the Frisbee.

"What are you doing tonight?" Hayden asked, as he threw the Frisbee back. He ran a long-fingered hand through unruly, dark curls, before shoving them back into jean pockets. He was a tall, skinny, slightly muscular, hummus-eating, alternative music kind of guy. At least, that's how Maddie would describe him. And handsome, very handsome.

Maddie jumped to catch the Frisbee, only to knock over packages of coffee beans. "Shit!" She quickly fixed the bags, facing them neatly on the shelf. "I don't know. Actually...I lied. I think my friend, Bella, and I have plans to go to a party tonight."

"It's my birthday this weekend," Hayden said. He straightened his Health Food apron and pulled up his loose jeans.

"Happy Birthday!"

"Are you going to do a little cheer?"

"A cheer?"

"Yeah, like every time your boyfriend comes in you do this "Yay!" thing. I think my birthday is worthy of a "Yay!" thing." Hayden leaned indolently against the shelves, his brown eyes watching Maddie.

"You think you're worthy of a "Yay!" thing. I don't think so. Besides, Donald probably won't be coming to visit anymore." Maddie said, flipping the Frisbee in her hands and avoided Hayden's eyes by noticing his well-shaped arms.

“Why? Did you dump his ass? He was just a little shit anyway. Look at his name, it could be cartoon-worthy, it *is* cartoon-worthy.”

Maddie dropped the Frisbee as she felt tears well up. “Donald is not cartoon-worthy! Maybe you are! Look at your nose, pretty sure only a cartoonist could draw that gruesome thing.” She bent and picked up the Frisbee. Actually his nose wasn’t at all gruesome, it was a nice nose, more worthy of a picture in a plastic surgeon’s office than not.

Hayden ran a hand through his hair. “Damn, Maddie.”

“Oh, shut-up.” Maddie lifted her chin, still trying to hold back tears. “I’m taking my break.”

Maddie stomped to the break room and threw herself down on to one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs placed around a small, round table. Only the blank gray walls, a row of lockers, and the hum of the refrigerator greeted her.

What an ass! Who does he think he is?

He’s Hayden, an outspoken guy, who doesn’t care about other people’s feelings.

Maddie pulled out a container of hummus and pita from the refrigerator. Before she sat at the table she was already munching on it.

After seeing Donald in class today Maddie knew it was over. He had acknowledged her, politely and distantly. Maddie accepted it was over. They had only dated for a couple months; they had fun together, and that’s it.

I know it’s over but, I just want to know why!

Donald hadn't given a reason, not even an, "It's not you, it's me," bullshit line. He just ended it, a nice, firm cut with the knife, severing the relationship in two.

Maddie popped a chunk of pita in her mouth as she checked her phone messages. One from her mom and one from her friend, Bella, both asking what she was doing.

Maddie had stayed at home once she graduated high school and attended the nearby university. Once entering the college lifestyle she decided red meat wasn't healthy and started shopping at the local Health Food Store. It's how she happened to get the job here and how she met Hayden, one of the most entertaining people she's ever met. He wasn't into eating healthy, interesting enough. He liked hummus and that was it. Maddie wasn't really sure how he got the job since the owners looked for workers with similar views on healthy food. Maybe the reason was because he hailed from California and had that laid back attitude. Why he was in the east now was anyone's guess, but he always seemed to have a tan; Maddie openly admitted to being jealous of that fact. The two co-workers hung out occasionally outside of work, but only with other co-workers.

He could be so infuriating, but entertaining, too. I mean, who plays Frisbee in the middle of a store?

Maddie grinned, her anger at him almost disappearing. She decided to get off break and see if Hayden had offended anyone else.

Seated at the register, Hayden was leaned over the counter, his attention caught by whatever he was working on. His unruly hair tumbled over his forehead, shielding his dark eyes from view.

Aww...He's so cute.

“What are you doing?” Maddie asked, trying to keep up the façade of anger. She leaned against the single register and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’ve been taking a cartoon drawing class at that college, you know, to get a break from all those boring business classes. I drew you something, but I don’t know if I want to show you,” Hayden flipped over the piece of paper he was working on. He grinned impishly and ran a hand through his hair.

“What is it?” Maddie leaned over the register, trying to glance at what Hayden was drawing.

“I think you’re cartoon-worthy.” Hayden handed the piece of paper over.

“What kind of cartoon?” Maddie snatched it out of his hands and saw it was a sketch of her, dressed in some kind of superhero outfit.

“It’s a superhero. Her power is to stomp around, hard enough to cause earthquakes. You can tell she’s been here, stuff’s been knocked off the shelves.”

“This is really good, Hayden. What’s her name?” Maddie asked, playing along.

“I haven’t really thought about it yet, but the name Quake-Machine works or Flower.”

“Flower? What kind of superhero name is that? That’s like changing Superman’s name to Little Girl with a Lollipop!”

“Yeah, isn’t it great?” Hayden’s brown eyes glinted mischievously.

Maddie shook her head, “We’ll work on the name.”

They both turned when they heard the bell on the door announce a newcomer. Friendly banter stopped and customer-friendly smiles slid into place.

“You can take that creepy smile off your face. It’s just me,” A tall, skinny blonde walked through the door, cell phone tucked against her ear. “Yeah, I’ll talk to you later; I’m with Maddie right now, yep, see you. Hey, Maddie, what’s up?” She stuffed the phone in her Prada purse.

“Bella! Yay!” Maddie smiled at her friend after glaring at Hayden.

“I guess I still don’t deserve a “Yay!” What if I change her name to Tulip? She has two lips.”

Bella raised an eyebrow, “I hope you don’t mean what I think.”

Hayden shrugged.

Bella’s lips curled in disgust. She flipped her white blonde hair and turned her back on him, “Maddie, you know that party you wanted to go to on Front Street?”

“Yeah, the one with the jello shots and keg?”

“Well...I heard Donald was going,” Bella inspected her perfectly manicured nails and flicked an imaginary piece of lint off her designer jacket.

“So? We can go to the same parties. It’ll be big anyway; we probably won’t see each other.”

“Maddie... You don’t want to run into him when you’re drunk and I don’t want to have to drag you off him, sobbing pathetically.” Bella’s voice was a high, steady whine.

Maddie frowned. “I don’t –”

“Excuse me, might I interject here,” Hayden slid in between Bella and Maddie carrying a box of cereal with a peace sign on the front. “This is an area of peace, as you can tell when you see this peace sign on the box of granola. It is a universal sign known everywhere, as is this.” Hayden presented his middle finger to Bella.

Bella's blue eyes emitted a cold stare. "What the hell is your problem? This is a private conversation!"

Maddie chuckled, secretly relieved of Hayden's "interjection."

The bell on the door jingled again letting the two workers know a customer had entered the store.

"A customer! I'm sorry, Maddie has to go count granola pieces while I talk to this new customer about our new vegetarian soups," Hayden said sweetly, as he steered Bella towards the door. "Have a good day! Come back during the full moon when everyone can see your claws. Or maybe you should just hide under a rock. Yeah, that's a good idea. Have a good day!" Hayden called out to Bella, who was already half way across the parking lot.

Maddie watched Bella get in her car and slam the door so hard the little Cavalier rocked. "Thanks Hayden, Bella can be a little..."

"Bitchy. I'd leave out the little part, personally. How are you friends with her? She's cold; I have chills right now."

Maddie laughed, "You do not. Bella has...her bad moments. She can be a good friend, just not right now, for some reason."

Hayden shrugged, "You want to go to my party instead? It's my birthday." He nodded, brows rose in excitement.

Maddie took the granola box and put it back on the shelf. "Now that I think about it, you're lying. It's not your birthday. You just had one last month. Remember, you made me buy you a present."

“Oh, right, um, really, it’s my roommate’s birthday. He would be disappointed if you didn’t come.” Hayden nodded encouragingly. He pulled a box out from under the register and started restocking the all natural chewing gum up at the register.

Maddie laughed and removed Windex and paper towel from a nearby cupboard and started cleaning the register. “ Maybe I –”

Someone nearby cleared his or her throat. “Excuse me.”

Maddie and Hayden looked up to see a little old lady laden down with food.

“I’m ready to check out now, if you please. Young man, would you help me with this food?”

Hayden jumped to do as she asked. Maddie moved behind the register and started the transaction.

“What a nice young man you are. Oh, and you’re so pretty, my dear.” She directed her gaze at Maddie, who continued to run the register. “What a nice looking set of workers. Imagine the kids you could have, you two would look so cute together.”

Hayden’s brows rose, Maddie blushed.

Maddie called the tender while Hayden bagged the woman’s groceries. The lady handed over a hundred dollar bill for 25 dollars worth of groceries.

“Young man, if you help me carry the groceries to my car, I’ll give you a shiny new quarter,” she smiled sweetly.

“Of course, which car is it?” Hayden gathered up the bags of groceries as Maddie handed back the change. Together, Hayden and the old lady left the store.

Maddie giggled once they were gone and finished cleaning the register. *He can be so nice when he wants to be.* She had just started wiping down the front windows when Hayden returned with a silly grin on his face and flipping a quarter from hand to hand.

“It’s not even shiny. Since when do co-workers mean future spouses? She said to put this towards our first date and I think it’s a good idea.” Hayden suddenly turned serious and dropped the quarter in the tip jar on the counter.

The smile slid off Maddie’s face like water. “I—what?” Then she laughed, “You’re joking! Not a good joke, Hayden.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I was going to try it on your friend, but her glare might turn me to ice.” Hayden gave a little smile and started walking down an aisle, “I’m going to do inventory or something like work.”

“Yeah, okay,” Maddie shrugged her shoulders, trying to shake off the awkward feeling. She bumped a cup of pens with her elbow and knocked them over. “Shit.”

Maddie walked around her room dressed in a cute skirt, a shiny top, and black heels.

Maddie leaned over to peer in the vanity mirror. She tousled her already tousled curls and reapplied lip gloss. She peered at her cell phone to see no missed calls.

Bella, where are you? Wherever you are I hope you’re in a better mood tonight.

Maddie had called Bella later, after work. Bella hadn’t picked up, but Maddie had left a message apologizing for Hayden’s behavior and hoping they could get together and party.

Maddie looked at the clock to see the hands read 10:36.

Where are you, Bella?

Maddie huffed impatiently and threw herself on the bed, thus knocking over a cup of water on the bedside table.

“Shit!” She mopped up the mess with a nearby, dirty shirt.

“It’s 10:39. I’m going out,” Maddie mumbled to herself and headed out the door.

The house was packed with people. Loud music pumped from an unseen source while people wandered around, holding their choice of drink. Groups were dancing in the living room, couples were making out in corners, a beer pong table was set up in the kitchen, and the game of quarters was being played on the counter top.

Bella ran into a group of friends as soon as she entered the party, who then directed her to the keg to buy a cup. She gulped some of the Bud Light and started playing a game of beer pong. Two games passed before Maddie and her partner lost. After a game of quarters Maddie was feeling the alcohol and joined her friends on the dance floor. The living room was hot and packed with people. Bella was pushed out of the way by a passing drunk person when she then tripped over someone’s feet and fell safely on the couch.

“Shit. Sorry,” she mumbled to the couple making out next to her as she wiped spilled beer off her skirt.

“No worries,” the guy mumbled and locked lips with the girl again.

“Donald?”

He swung his head back around, cheeks pale in the dim lighting. “Maddie?”

“Bella? What are you doing?” Maddie’s mind blanked when she saw her best friend in her ex-boyfriend’s arms.

“Maddie, I’m sorry. I tried telling you before, but I just couldn’t. I didn’t want to hurt you.” Donald broke off, looking upset.

“Before? This happened before?” Maddie felt sick. *What is going on here?*
“Bella, how could you? He has the name of a cartoon character!” *What are these words coming out of my mouth? It doesn’t make sense, none of this does. I have to get away, go some place else where none of this is real!*

Bella smiled coldly and hugged Donald around his shoulders. “Life’s no fun when your friend is happier than you are.”

Maddie blanched. “What are you saying? You hooked up with Donald while we were dating? You did this on purpose! How could you? Bella, you slut!” Maddie felt herself lurch towards the person she once thought of as her best friend.

Bella jumped up and threw her drink in Maddie’s face. “Don’t you dare try to hit me! I could kick your skinny ass.”

Maddie wiped beer off her face and fought back the urge to laugh. *What a ridiculous situation this is! What kind of hell is this?*

“You did this because I was too happy? Are you the devil?” Maddie reached forward and grabbed Bella’s shoulders. “I don’t care about Donald Duck over there. You were my friend, my best friend!”

Bella tore out of her grasp and slapped her across the face.

“Hey, girls! Stop this fighting!” Donald jumped up off the couch to stand between them. “I’m sorry, Maddie.”

“She came on to you, didn’t she?” Maddie asked Donald.

Donald averted his eyes which was answer in itself.

Maddie pushed Donald aside and threw herself at Bella.

Someone tore through the crowd that had gathered around them. “What the hell is going on in my house?” The guy didn’t pause for a second when he saw two girls rolling on the floor. He reached down and pulled them apart and nearly carried them to the front door where he pushed them outside.

Landing in a heap on the porch Maddie and Bella just glared at each other. Bella wiped her bleeding lip and Maddie held a sleeve to her scratched and bleeding eyebrow. People watched them from inside the front door, waiting for the fight to continue, some even cheering. Maddie stood up and walked away.

The first thing Maddie became aware of was a pounding head, then a sour stomach. She groaned and rolled over only to encounter a warm body.

A warm body? Who’s warm body?

A panic rose up in Maddie. She opened her eyes slowly to see who this warm body was: dark, wavy hair, long, trim, shirtless body, a very familiar face.

Hayden. Oh, God, what did I do?

“You ate five packets of vegetarian soup.”

He was awake.

“I’m sorry, what?” Maddie asked, realizing she had spoken out loud earlier.

Hayden repeated what he said. “It was pretty entertaining. People were cheering you on and you would have eaten six, but you knocked over the bowl.”

“Uh...Shit.” Maddie rubbed her eyes and hit the bruised eyebrow. She grimaced.

“I worked more on the superhero. Her favorite saying is “Shit,” so you know what that means.” Hayden sat up and ran a hand through his hair and stretched.

Maddie couldn't help staring at his nicely formed chest and finally answered after a few beats of silence. “She's clumsy?”

“No, this cartoon is not child-oriented.”

Maddie giggled and once again noticed his naked chest. She looked down to see if her clothes were still intact. They were, that was a positive, but that didn't mean much.

“Hayden.”

“Yeah?”

“Did anything else happen last night?”

Hayden was silent for a few seconds, his eyes bore into hers. “You jumped me like a mad dog and ripped my clothes off.”

Maddie's eyes grew large and her mouth dropped open.

Hayden grinned, “I'm teasing, clumsy one.” He reached over and ran a thumb across her lower lip. “Nothing happened. You came, you partied, you passed out. Run of the mill college experience.”

“Oh, that's good.” Tension rushed out of Maddie. She frowned, her lip felt weird where he touched her.

“Everything all right? You were pretty upset last night.” Hayden rolled on to his side so he could look at her.

Unfortunately, Maddie remembered the first party quite clearly.

Too clearly. Pain sliced through her heart. Maddie still didn't even know what to think about what Bella had done.

"What am I going to do?" She whispered.

"Eat pancakes."

"What?"

"Eat pancakes. Good hangover food. Let's make some or are you still full from the vegetarian soup?" Hayden grinned at her and slid off the bed.

Maddie was distracted by him and the only piece of clothing on him, boxer briefs, "Soup? Oh yeah. I mean, no, I think I could eat some pancakes."

Hayden pulled on a pair of pants. "Good to hear. You okay? You have a weird look on your face."

Maddie's eyes turned round and she finally brought them back to his face. "Yeah, I'm great. Well...I could use some Advil or something."

Hayden laughed. "Sounds good."

Maddie left the bathroom stall and washed her hands. She pulled a compact out of her purse and quickly fixed her make-up.

Life had calmed down. Donald had withdrawn from the class they shared, so Maddie never saw him anymore. In the month since the fight Maddie hadn't spoken to Bella, which was probably a good thing. She had picked her life back up again, started hanging out with other friends, but found she couldn't trust them as easily as she could before.

Maddie swiped lip gloss on before heading towards the door to go to class. The door swung open before she could even touch it and there stood Bella. They stood frozen in the doorway staring at each other before Maddie decided to say something.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

“How’s it going?”

“Good. How are you?”

“Fine. How’s school going?”

“Okay.” Bella averted her eyes and shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Maddie chewed her lip and jingled her car keys in her hand. *Just say it, clear the air.* “I’m sorry.”

Bella jerked her eyes back to Maddie, “What?”

“I’m sorry I hit you.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Bella took a deep breath, “For everything.”

“Me, too.” Maddie moved aside to let Bella through. “See ya later.”

“Yeah, see ya.” Bella waved before disappearing into a bathroom stall.

Maddie left the girls bathroom and headed to class.

They probably won’t ever be good friends again, but at least there was no more discord between them.

Maddie felt better than she had in weeks.

Maddie pulled into the parking lot of the Health Food Store and put her car in park. She sat there and drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. She could see Hayden's car was the only other car parked in the parking lot.

A vague memory had plagued Maddie since the morning she had woken up in Hayden's bed. It involved his lips on hers. Ever since then it seemed strained between them whenever they worked together. There was something there, between them, and it took a horrible drunken night for her to realize that. She had to do something, what that something was she didn't know yet.

"Okay, lets do this." Maddie grabbed her purse, got out of the car, and purposely walked into the store.

Hayden was standing at the register, pencil in hand, drawing, when the bell on the door caught his attention. The customer friendly smile slid into place automatically, but was quickly replaced by a more easy-going grin when he saw his co-worker.

"Maddie, what are you doing here on your day off?"

"I'm here to..." Maddie rambled off, looking for something to say, and then spotted the vegetarian soup. "Buy some vegetarian soup, just couldn't get enough of it that one night." Maddie felt the urge to slap herself. *What am I saying?*

Hayden got out from behind the register and leaned against the front of it.

"Really?"

Maddie nervously met his eyes, "I ate five bowls remember." She stepped closer, only to trip over her own foot and grabbed his arm to steady herself. "Oohh, shit. Hayden."

"Yeah?" His brown eyes seemed to glow the closer Maddie got to him.

“I think you’re cartoon-worthy.”

“Thank you, I-” Hayden paused and studied her for a second. “What’s up?”

“You lied to me.”

Hayden lifted a questioning eyebrow. “About what?”

“The night of the vegetarian soup.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you lie?”

“You had just broken up with Donald Duck and gotten beat up by your best friend, so, you didn’t seem too receptive.”

“Receptive. Good word. Maybe you shouldn’t have lied.”

Hayden was quiet and just studied her. He bit his lip and then grabbed her arm and pulled her close.

“What are you doing?” *Why do I sound ridiculously breathless?* Maddie didn’t know whether to lean in closer or break out of his embrace.

“Trying to get a “yay” out of you.” He brought his lips down on hers and kissed her. When Hayden pulled away he asked, “You’re not going to turn into Quake-Machine are you?”

She shook her head.

“Do you want to go on a date with me?”

Maddie smiled, “I’ll try it.”

The bell on the door jingled, which signaled someone entering. The little old lady who gave out quarters walked in. She smiled when she saw Maddie wrapped up in Hayden’s arms and nodded approvingly before going about her shopping.

The End