

My Year Zero

by Rachel Gold

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Other Bella Books by Rachel Gold

Being Emily
Just Girls

For Alice
Love, always.

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“There was no year zero... At first glance this style of numbering might not seem so bad, but it guaranteed trouble.”

—From *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*

CHAPTER ONE

When I met Blake, I had no idea that she would destroy my life. She was this small person, darkly incandescent, vibrating with nervous energy. Eyes blue-gray like a kingfisher's wing (moving as fast). I should have known by the way she went on about infinities and zero. Who falls in love with zero?

But I'm ahead of myself. The story doesn't start with Blake. As with most great stories, it starts with sex.

A few months after I'd turned sixteen, I figured it was time to have sex. Almost half of American teens have had sex before they turn seventeen, so if I could get laid this year I'd be a little ahead of the curve. And I'm talking about girl-girl sex here, so it wasn't like I had to worry about getting her pregnant.

I didn't want to *just* get laid. I'd settle for it, but I wanted the whole deal. I wanted holding hands and making out and gifts and movie dates. I wanted to fall in love.

This was a hundred times harder than I wanted it to be because I lived in a town of eighty-six thousand that felt like a town of eight thousand.

My plan was to get myself down to the Twin Cities for the Pride festival that summer. This meant six months to get into

pickupable shape. My best getting-picked-up asset is my body, which resembles a department store mannequin, except alive, stretched out longer than it should be, and with a bit of muscle. My face is cubist art: long, blocky nose that would look okay if I had well-defined cheekbones, but I don't. My cheeks are shapeless and prone to blotchiness.

If I had any chance at getting hit on, it was going to be in a tank top.

Which is why I was in the weight room of the gym during fourth period while everyone else was playing volleyball. Also I hate team sports. First off, I hate sports. And I hate groups, so team sports are double the hate.

I told the gym teacher I was getting over an ear infection brought on by Duluth's teeth-freezingly cold wind. I shouldn't run around a bunch—could I go to the weight room instead?

I liked lifting weights. (I mean hand weights, not some massive deadlift Miss Universe thing—wait, Miss Universe is a beauty pageant. But Mr. Universe is a muscle guy? That's messed up.) The thing about weights is that it's me against myself and frankly, I'm pretty easy to beat, so I get to win a lot.

The weight room smelled like dirty socks that had been ground into a manure pile by an asphalt truck, but I had it to myself. That was more than I could say for any other part of my school day. I was sitting on the end of a weight bench doing bicep curls and humming along with my iPod. Okay, I was singing. Not loud and certainly not on key.

The song blasting through my headphones was Halestorm's "Break In." I switched from the well of self-pity (I'd never have anyone to make me feel defenseless and known like Lzzy Hale was singing about), to feeling like it had to happen eventually. The last few lines might have come out of my mouth at an audible volume.

I finished the set and glanced at the clock over the door. A woman was leaning against the frame, grinning at me—not mean-grinning—amused, eye-crinkly grinning. She had purple-streaked hair and a short, curvy body, emphasized by the charcoal and pomegranate sundress that clung to her hips. Over the dress was a worn leather jacket and below it heavy black motorcycle boots; very much like no one I had ever seen before.

It's not like I'm prone to hallucinations, but I have a vivid imagination and I figured it'd finally gone over the edge. It made

sense, school was that dull this year and my possible sex life was that arid.

She jerked her chin at me and said, “Hey, I’m the Queen of Rogues.”

“Oh,” I said. “I *am* hallucinating.”

She laughed. “Nah, this is my hair’s natural color.”

I realized I was holding the (five pound—totally not impressive) weights up by my shoulders and put them down.

“I’m Lauren,” I said, still not sure she was real, but it’s never a bad idea to be polite. “Are you lost?”

“I came to meet a friend for lunch,” she said.

“And decided to wander into the weight room?”

“I heard singing,” she replied with a smirk.

I blushed and looked away, which is when my brain started to kick in. This might be a real human being and I was missing my opportunity to say something clever like: *I always thought the rogues were a democracy.*

“Where’s the cafeteria?” she asked.

“It’s across the hall from the big gym,” I told her.

Instead of leaving to find said cafeteria, she sat on the weight bench across from me. I didn’t think she was that much older, but she seemed elegant and cute and edgy, compared to my lanky, awkward and moist. Her hair was a honeycomb brown with thick streaks of dark purple that made her alabaster cheeks seem even whiter. Shoulder-length messy curls, plus the round shape of her face, gave her a mischievous fallen angel look.

“How did you get to be queen?” I asked, uncomfortably aware of my damp T-shirt and sports bra, all gangles and sweat. I added, “I mean, I thought the rogues were democratic.”

The words sounded much stupider coming out of my mouth than they had in my head.

She laughed, a lips-mostly-closed chuckle, like someone took a bigger laugh and compressed it into her mouth. Or like she’d learned to laugh in a way that didn’t mess with her candy apple lip gloss.

“I’m Sierra,” she said. And in a somber tone she added, “It’s not a democracy.”

“Yeah, of course not. Do you want me to walk you over to the cafeteria? Give me a sec to change.”

“Sure.”

I intended to walk sedately into the locker room, but it was more like drunken weaving since I was so thrown off-balance from this conversation. Girls with orchid-streaked hair didn't just show up in my life. Had I conjured her? Certainly not with my singing (that was more appropriate to banishing), but with my wishing for someone to be in my life.

She was probably straight I told myself as I threw on jeans, a non-damp bra, an undershirt and a flannel. I patted my hair down with wet hands so it wasn't so frizzelated. Statistically, most people were straight.

I jammed my feet into my Doc Martens and, while I tied them, went over her appearance like I could puzzle her out: the sundress was pure straight girl, but not the boots. They were heavily scuffed in the toe, like she'd had them forever. The leather jacket was worn too, that had to be a good sign. Her hair—what did that mean?

When I came back into the weight room, Sierra was still there, existing. She followed me into the hall.

“Where did you come from?” I asked, and it sounded all blunt and weird so I added, “I mean, you don't go here.”

“I'm really from another galaxy,” she said. “But that's a long story. I'm up from the Cities with my family. A friend of mine goes here and we told the office I'm a senior considering a transfer so I could come hang out.”

“You're not?”

“First year of college. I figured it'd be fun to hop on a bus and come out for lunch and maybe sit in on a class of hers to remind me why college is a thousand times better.”

“Fun to hop on a bus in the snow? In December? In a sundress?”

“Wool stockings,” she said, the smirk back on her lips. “There's my friend. You want to eat with us?”

“Uh, I have to...I'm in the next lunch period.”

“Maybe I'll see you later,” she said.

“Yeah.”

She was already walking away, waving to her friend, some senior-looking girl I didn't know. I wandered back into the hall trying to remember what class I was supposed to go to and wondering if all that had actually happened.

CHAPTER TWO

When I got to lunch, I expected Sierra to have vanished back into my overactive imagination. Not only was she there, but she was holding court at the end of a table, leaning against the wall, talking with a group of girls that included my not best friend Jenny.

Jenny was golden: blond, cheerleadery, all that. Sierra's effortless loose curls made Jenny's pristine golden ringlets look like they were trying too hard. (Jenny always looked like she was trying too hard, but no one seemed to care.)

I met Jenny in fifth grade but we grew apart in junior high. Everyone grew apart in junior high. Last year she started hanging out with me again. By some miracle—or by the power of Jenny's evil mastermind leadership—instead of kids turning on her for hanging out with the school's one out lesbian, they left me alone because the queen bee found me useful.

I was supposed to get my tray and walk over and say hi, like it was nothing. But I froze. I shuffled out of the doorway and away from the serving line. Sierra's glistening red lips moved, Jenny and the other girls laughed. They hadn't seen me yet, I could still run.

An arctic blast of air hit the side of my face and I turned toward it. So did everyone else in the cafeteria.

A tall, skinny kid had one of the windows open and was climbing in. From the outside. With no coat on, despite the fact that it was ten degrees out, too cold even for snow to fall.

Everything weird that happens at my school happens in the winter. This is because winter in Duluth is fourteen months long. In the depth of that winter, with only eight hours of daylight, everyone loses their mind eventually.

Winter holiday break was three days away and already in December we'd had a kid eating bugs throughout my entire English class, two guys caught jerking each other off in the bathroom, and a fistfight over chess. There was a rumor that one of the seniors had run away from home with an older girl, and four pregnancy scares. Oh and a prank involving a bucket of urine that backfired spectacularly.

When I saw this kid shove the window open, I figured it was more of the same.

He had waxy, buff-colored skin with too prominent bones, short, greasy mud-colored hair and amber eyes. I recognized him but I couldn't think of where I'd seen him. Sure he was a senior at this high school, but I'd seen his photo someplace specific, if I could remember it.

He put one long leg in through the window, bent low and pushed himself over the sill. He was talking, muttering at first, but when his head came into the room his words got louder. Maybe this wasn't a prank. I put a few more feet between us.

He was saying, "Drones. Drones! Micro-drones, spies, in everything, need a microscope, you can feel them watching, recording." He pulled his other leg over the sill and stood up.

He held something in his hand, rectangular and compact, with metal and wiring, and he started waving it over his head.

"It's a bomb!" someone behind me screamed.

A hundred students moved at once, knocking over chairs, dropping books, running for the doors and getting stuck with the other students trying to shove their way out.

A few of us didn't move. Most of the stoner kids' table stayed seated, watching the guy with half-lidded eyes. A couple of guys who seemed like they might know him stood in the middle of the room looking nervously from him to the nearest door. The kids at the back of the line for the doors had turned to watch. Sierra

was among them. She was composed, patiently waiting to exit, watching me.

I shrugged at her. My heart was going fast and I felt light-headed. Some of the people shoving through the doorways were yelling, one girl screaming. I wasn't eager to join them.

The kid held the metal box in front of his face like he could see into it and then waved it around again. I could almost read the writing on the side. It was printed; clear words that should make sense.

"They're after me," he said. "They've implanted me with the drones, I know it. Can you see them? Come here and tell me if you can see them. I know you can. They'll get you too. You can't run. They'll get you!"

I remembered where I'd seen his face. It was in a photo of the robotics team.

The security guard came up next to me. Brown shirt and khakis, walkie-talkie in her hand, dark hair back in a tight braid. "Come with me," she said.

"He's on the robotics team," I told her.

Her wide eyes and raised brows suggested either that she had no patience for me or thought I was as crazy as he was. I couldn't tell which.

"That might not be a bomb," I said. "It looks like a hard drive. See the printing on the white side?"

She blinked at me a few times and called across the room to him, "Son, is that a hard drive?"

"They're in my data," he yelled back. "They want what I've got. It's all here. Can you copy it? You have to save it for me."

He lunged across the room and shoved it at her, but she didn't take it.

"What kind of drive is that?" I asked.

He pulled away, pressed it to his chest, looked hurt. "You're testing me. It's a Western Digital 2 terabyte SATA drive. You think I'd trust my data to anything else? This is cutting edge, this is over the edge, beyond the edge, this is the future times a million, that's why they want it. They need this tech. You have to take me out of here. They're going to find me."

With the drive this close, I could read the words "Western Digital" along the side. He was right. How could he be ranting

about drones and at the same time know exactly what he had in his hand? Did crazy work like that? Part of the world in focus and another part wildly out of control?

Sirens outside. He glanced back at the open window. A light dusting of snow, lifted up from the ground and blew onto the radiator where it fizzled.

“Oh man, the drones are here. They’re in me. They gave me away. Shit, help me hide.”

He ran across the room and shoved himself into the closet with the napkins and ketchup.

“You should evacuate with the other students,” the guard told me.

Two cops were pushing their way in through the crowded cafeteria doors as I reached them. They passed me and I heard the guard tell them, “We think he might be holding a computer hard drive.”

More than half of the doors from the hallway outside the cafeteria were closed like they were supposed to be in lockdown mode. Further down the hall, doors were still open. Everyone with lockers away from the cafeteria was told they could get their coats and go home or wait in the far classrooms for buses. We were two periods from the end of the day.

I found Jenny and Sierra in one of the big classrooms at the far end of the school. They were standing by a window that faced the parking lot with all the cop cars. One of the clone girls that always follows Jenny around was with them. I didn’t remember her name.

When she saw me, Jenny ran over and fake hugged me: the kind where your arms go around the other person but there’s no real contact. The clone girl patted my shoulder. She was very pale with limp, wheat-blond hair, as if when they copied Jenny they turned the exposure up too high. Sierra stayed where she was by the window, turned to watch us.

“Weren’t you scared?” Jenny asked me.

“I guess so,” I said. I felt shaky now, ripples in my hands and my legs. Wasn’t that how scared felt?

“What do you mean you guess?” she asked, voice rising. “You stood there staring at him. Did you know he was going to do that?”

“Of course not. But everyone was going through the doors at the same time and, I don’t know. Isn’t it good to not panic?”

I went over to the window to see if they'd brought the kid out yet. Jenny followed, rolling her eyes at me. She said, "When there's a bomb you're supposed to panic. You're really weird sometimes."

She'd told me that before. Half the time it was because I didn't agree that a guy she liked was cute, so I ignored it. Yeah, I didn't cry at sad movies, but that's because crying makes you appear weak. And I didn't gush over new clothes or groan when we got extra homework, because why bother. If that made me weird, I guess I was.

I told her, "It wasn't a bomb. It was only a hard drive."

"He was totally mental, though," the clone girl said. "Like schizo or bipolar and completely off his meds."

Sierra straightened up, seeming inches taller than the clone girl, even though she wasn't. "Not cool," she said. "I have a friend who's bipolar. It's not like that."

"He's *crazy*," the girl insisted. She pointed toward the parking lot.

The cops were leading the kid out to the squad car, his hands cuffed behind his back. He kept shouting. The wind carried hints of his words across the parking lot and through the glass of the window. I heard "drones" a few more times. He tried to run when they reached the car and they had to wrestle him into the back.

We stayed silent until the car drove away. School was optional for the rest of the day. Half of the students were already gone. With break a few days away, we'd take any excuse to leave.

Jenny and her clone left me and Sierra standing by the window.

"What are you doing next?" I asked, feeling more nervous about asking that than facing the kid with the wild hard drive.

Sierra shrugged. "I guess I'll catch the bus back to my aunt's."

"When they let me back to my locker to get my coat, I can drive you back."

"You have a car?"

"Yeah," I told her.

"That'd be super sweet." She glanced out the window again and back to me. "You were very coolheaded in there."

I didn't know how to tell her that cool had nothing to do with it. I didn't react to a lot of stuff. Sometimes I'd get scared or angry for no reason and other times when I should have been completely freaked out, I didn't feel it. My father was an attorney and he taught

me and my brother to make logical arguments as soon as we could talk. I figured it came from that; I could see things logically and not get all wrapped up in them.

“I’m afraid of centipedes,” I said and wanted to kick myself because of how stupid it sounded.

But Sierra laughed and the whole inside of my torso dissolved into jittery static.

“So if he’d come in waving a centipede?” she asked.

“I’d have been the first one out the doors,” I told her. “I’m just not afraid of hard drives. Did you get to eat?”

“I started to but it was terrible. I haven’t had a school lunch in a year and I can’t say that I miss them in the least. How long do you have until they spring you from this place?”

“What, until I graduate?”

She nodded. Her eyes were super blue. Winter sky cobalt blue when it’s too cold for clouds.

“I’m a junior,” I told her. “Though I’ll have enough credit to graduate next winter. You know, there’s a pizza place not far. If I can get to my locker...”

“I’d love to,” she said.

* * *

Sierra didn’t disappear before I got back. She followed me out of the building to the parking lot and the car my father got me a few months ago for my sixteenth birthday: a carbide gray Subaru Legacy. The name was ironic since I was so not his legacy, that was my brother Isaac. I was his failure.

“This is yours?” Sierra asked when she got in.

I braced myself in case this was the start of one of those stinging Jews-with-money comments and said, “Um, mostly. We got it used and technically it belongs to my father, but it’s mine to drive.”

She nodded and didn’t say ‘must be nice’ or the stupider things that started with ‘you people...’

I drove along Superior Street to Sammy’s Pizza. It was filling up with out-of-school kids, but we got one of the little black tables against the wall and decided to split a cheese pizza with extra cheese. Sierra contemplated the black and white tile, the metal stools, the gooseberry green wall color, the overall mashup of kitsch and modern. I couldn’t tell if she thought it was cool or ancient.

Did it count as a date if you met a girl by accident and ended up getting pizza because of a bomb scare?

I wanted it to count as a date. I'd come out as lesbian about five seconds into the first time I kissed a boy. To be fair, I kissed him a few more times and kissed another boy, all in all pretty boring. Like Jell-O. Not the texture of the kiss, but the way that when I see Jell-O on a table at a buffet, I'm not drawn to it. I might take some if there's nothing else sweet, but most of the time I'll skip dessert. It's hardly worth the effort it takes to eat it.

Maybe you love Jell-O, I'm not saying it's across the board the worst dessert ever (that award goes to unripe fruit), I'm saying it's not my thing. Sierra, on the other hand, I could thoroughly get used to watching her eat pizza.

"I hope he's okay," I said. "What do you think happens if the cops have to take you away like that?"

"They lock you up in the psych ward for a while," Sierra answered, super matter-of-fact.

I looked at her and she shrugged like "what?" I wanted to ask how she knew that, but it didn't seem polite.

"I don't think it was bipolar, though," she said. "Blake's never like that. She's my best friend. She's deeply cool. She has a character in the story I write with a bunch of other people. Do you write?"

"A little. I mostly draw."

I'd managed to get a bite of hot pizza into my mouth and was trying to figure out a graceful way to chew and swallow. Most of the time I knew how to function like a normal human being, honest.

"What?" she asked.

I swallowed and gulped some water.

"Mostly comics," I said. "Not the superhero kind. Do you read manga?"

"Not really. Should I?" she asked and took another bite of her pizza slice, as if talking then chewing was an easy skill to master.

"Uh, yeah, everybody should."

She laughed. "Will you lend me some?"

I reached into my backpack for Nakamura Asumiko's "Adolte and Adarte" and slid it across the table to her. She flipped through it.

"I'll mail it back to you when I'm done. Do you like science fiction?"

I nodded, hoping she'd look away so I could swallow. The bite of pizza seemed so small when it took it, but it was expanding in my mouth.

"You should join us, the story group. We only have one illustrator."

She glanced down, riffling the edge of the manga, and I gulped down the mass of pizza.

"What's the story about?" I asked.

It could have been a grinding tragedy about garbage collectors on Mars and I'd have said yes.

Nobody here wrote group stories. Almost nobody here wrote stories as far as I knew. Most of the students were either obsessed with grades so they could get out of here for college, or obsessed with drinking and hooking up. My father considered my comics and my illustrations to be a kid thing that I'd grow out of when I finally decided if I wanted to be an architect or a corporate marketing goon.

"Our story takes place in this galaxy that's ruled by four old gods but there's this race of Illudari—like high elves—who are fighting to replace the old gods with their own leaders, the kings and queens of the galaxy."

"The Queen of Rogues?" I asked.

"That's who I am. In the current story, she's actually allied with one of the old gods, Lord Stone, to go against the most powerful of all the old gods. But some of the other kings and queens are upset so there's fighting between them."

"How do you write it?"

"There are a bunch of different ways you can submit your posts, or write in the group document we have going. Dustin, he's Lord Stone, he compiles it all with the art and puts it on the official site. And we talk about it when we're together or on chat—about where the story is going next so you kind of know what to write. Your pizza's getting cold."

I managed a few more bites as she told me about the story background because she peered across the restaurant while she talked. I could only half listen. When I listened too much or looked at her, I started to feel all full of static again and forgot how to eat.

When we'd eaten half the pizza and boxed the rest, she gave me directions to her aunt's house. It was a normal-sized house on the

west side of town, where we used to live. I parked by the curb and wasn't sure what to do next.

Sierra took my hand off the wheel. She ran her thumb along the edge of my index finger, burning and tickling my skin.

"Ink," she said.

I nodded because I usually had ink on my hands and with her touching me, I couldn't figure out how to form words.

"Give me your address for the comic and your email. I'll have Dustin send you an invite to the story."

I wasn't going to pull away from her touch, but she let go, so I reached into the backseat and got my bag. I tore a sheet of paper out of my notebook and wrote down what she wanted.

She folded the paper and said, "Thanks!"

She was out of the car and moving up the shoveled, stone walk to the house, the bottom half of her dress seeming out of place between leather jacket and boots. She let herself in and shut the door. After I'd put the car in drive, I realized that I had none of her information: no email, no phone number. I didn't even know her last name.

I couldn't get out of the car and go ask. I hated myself, but I couldn't. My heart pounded and some (smarter, tougher) part of my brain was yelling at me to run up the front walk, ring the bell and ask. The slower, dopey, well-behaved part of my brain drove us away from the house.

I got home and sat for a while in the garage rubbing my thumb against the side of my index finger (it didn't feel the same, not even close) and wondering if I'd ever hear from her again.