

IT wasn't every morning that Rachel found a handsome stranger on her doorstep.

"Good morning, young lady," said the stranger.

She failed to suppress a giggle. "Good morning ... young sir. I haven't seen you around here before. Are you visiting?"

"I'm passing through," he replied, his face lit with a delightful smile. "Locke Cole, at your service. Well, most people just call me Locke."

"I thought they might. I'm Rachel."

"That's a pretty name," said Locke. "It suits you."

Rachel remembered her manners. "Thank you. So what brings you here, Locke?"

"I'm a treasure hunter," he said proudly.

"What kind of treasure?"

"Any kind."

A thought occurred to her. "Does that include ... girls?"

"Not usually."

"Good," she replied automatically, before remembering the reason she had stepped outside in the first place. "Um - I have to be on my way now, but I hope I'll see you again later."

"Yes," he replied; there was that lovely smile again. "Have a good day, Rachel."



The next morning, Locke was waiting outside for her again. “Good morning, Rachel,” he said.

“Good morning, Locke. Did you go treasure hunting yesterday?”

“I did,” he replied, “and I brought something back for you.” From somewhere in his clothes he unhooked a small turquoise stone and showed it to her in his palm, tilting it so it caught the light and sparkled with different colours. “It has a hole in it, see; you can wear it on a necklace.”

Rachel felt a little embarrassed. “That’s beautiful. But I don’t have anything I can give you in return.”

He shook his head. “It’s a gift.” And he pressed it into her hand. She briefly felt his warm, soft skin against hers.

“Thank you. It’s lovely. Where did you find it?”

“In the mines.”

“The mines? Isn’t it dangerous there?” Rachel had barely met the man, but she realised as she asked that she felt genuine concern for him already.

He shook his head warmly. “Not for me. I’m armed. And my dad taught me what to do. He was a treasure hunter too.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you stay out of trouble,” she replied, glancing down at her new pendant.

“I do. And please excuse me, but I must head off. I’ve got a long trip to make today.”

“OK. See you later.”

He turned to leave with a gracious nod.

“Oh ... Locke!”

He waited.

“It was nice to talk to you again,” she said.

“Likewise, Rachel.”

She caught herself watching as he walked away, and thought: it’s official, I have a crush on him. A crush on Locke Cole! She clasped a hand to her mouth in glee.



The next day, there he was once more. She had come to expect him by now – not that that made him any less welcome.

“Mr Cole,” she greeted him.

“You’re very formal this morning.”

“I thought I should be polite to the man who brings me such lovely gifts.”

He chuckled. “Ah, how did you know? I’ve got something else for you today.” It was a round red stone, smaller than yesterday’s.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Locke admitted. “I just thought it was pretty. It reminded me of you.”

Rachel decided in that moment that it was confirmed: she’d never met a more perfect man. “Locke, would I ... could I maybe come with you sometime?”

“Come with me? You mean ... treasure hunting?” He frowned. “I don’t know. I wouldn’t want to put you in danger.”

“But there must be some places that are safer.”

“You’re right ... somewhere not too far from the village, maybe. OK. When would you be free to come?”

She considered. “This afternoon?”

“This afternoon? Really?” He was beaming. She was positive she’d never seen anything so adorable.

“I’d love to. If that suits you.”

“Definitely,” he promised. “Rachel, I have to go now, but I’ll meet you here later. Have a filling lunch – that’s Locke’s number one rule for apprentice treasure hunters.”

“Will do,” she replied, smiling as he headed off.



They went treasure hunting in one of the hedges behind the village. Locke fought a creature, taking it down with two swift strokes of his knife. Rachel climbed into the hedge to retrieve a bird’s nest with three eggs inside, and when she took out the third one Locke took her in his arms and kissed her, and two of the eggs broke but they were both so happy that it didn’t matter.

As the weeks went on, the two of them explored more of the area. Locke would normally go treasure hunting most after-

noons, but on some days he visited somewhere less forbidding and took Rachel with him. He began to teach Rachel to fight; soon she could take down a leaf bunny with almost no help. Locke told her between kisses that she was the best fighter in Kohlingen, and he was probably right. After a while, they ran out of interesting locations to explore near the village, and gradually started to venture into more challenging places, but Rachel always felt safe with Locke protecting her.

One afternoon, after a fruitful expedition, they rested on a mountaintop and looked out over the village. Rachel laid her head on Locke's lap and stared up into the clear sky.

"Locke," said Rachel. "Can I ask you something?"

He stroked her hair in assent.

"You ... won't be here forever, will you? In Kohlingen?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I know you've been travelling all over. You probably planned to just be here for a while. And it's been some time now – I just thought you might be intending to move on again. I don't want to hold you back." She hadn't quite told the truth – what she really wanted was for Locke to settle in Kohlingen, in a nice house at the edge of the village with room for the two of them and some extra space for ...

He shook his head, interrupting her fantasy. "When I arrived here ... I had no home. I was just travelling because I wasn't attached to anywhere. Especially after Dad died. But

now I finally have a reason to stay in one place. Why would I leave you when you make me so happy?"

She sat up and kissed him tenderly. "Locke. You should come and have dinner with us tonight. Meet my dad."

He looked a little worried. She squeezed his hand.

"Don't be scared of him. He'll like you."

But when they arrived for dinner, Rachel's father was in one of his worse moods.

"So this is your boyfriend?" he asked abruptly, looking Locke up and down with suspicious eyes. "How do you earn your keep then, young man?"

"I'm a treasure hunter," said Locke nervously.

"A treasure hunter?" He laughed, but there was no jollity in his voice. "So that's what thieves call themselves now? Rachel, you realise you're dating a thief? You can do better."

Locke's grip on Rachel's hand tightened. She ran her thumb over his soothingly.

The meal was awkward, and Locke seemed upset, but Rachel was glad to get through it without any outright antagonism between the two men. When they had finished eating, she took Locke outside to see him off.

"He's right," he said despondently, as soon as Rachel closed the door. "I'm sorry, Rachel. I'm just a thief, trying to make myself seem respectable by calling myself a treasure hunter – I hope you don't think any less of me, but I know I deceived you –"

She placed a finger to his lips. "Locke."

He continued to protest. "Your dad was right, you deserve better than someone who lies to you –"

"Locke," she said again. "I've seen you out there, remember? I know you're a treasure hunter. And you know, you can be whatever you want to be. You're yourself, Locke. You don't have to be a thief just because of how you fight or what sort of weapons you carry. I think the whole class system's silly anyway."

"Thank you," he said.

She kissed him. "Don't worry about Dad. He's just protective. Since Mother died ... he wants to keep me safe. He doesn't like the idea of me fighting, but I'm stronger than he is now."

"Your mother ... do you remember her?" Locke asked.

"Barely. I was five."

He nodded. "Mine died when I was young, too."

"Oh, Locke," she said softly. "Both parents gone."

"It doesn't hurt anymore," he said, but his lip was trembling. She pulled him into a tight embrace and pretended not to notice his tears.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too, Locke. Let's go up another mountain next week."

He nodded, reinvigorated. "Yes. Perfect. I'll pick out a good one for us. See you tomorrow, my darling girl."

They kissed goodnight, and she watched him retreat into the shadows.