

Bits of Molly

by: Sophie

*Author's note: This story holds a special place in my heart. It has received the most interest and love of anything I've ever written. When I wrote Bits of Molly, I had intended to make a psychological thriller. But in the end, I think I wrote a coming of age story. Many people have told me that this should be an actual book, and while I don't think that will ever happen, I'm proud to be able to bring it to a proper format for eReaders and phones. If you enjoy this story, consider reading Mac && Oaklee!

Premise: Molly is a lonely high school girl with only one friend. No one really notices her, but she doesn't notice anyone else either. She prefers to stay in her head, spending her time daydreaming of what could be. Sometimes those thoughts are scary, but they always fascinate Molly. But are all Molly's daydreams a fantasy? Is all reality real?

Disclaimers: wetting, blood, hallucinations, little, diapers, trauma

Chapter One

I wasn't fully aware what was going on in Mr. Brusly's biology class. I hardly ever took notes or paid attention. That's perhaps why I was doing so poorly. My mom would surely throw a fit when she saw my report card next month, but that wasn't incentive enough for me to work harder.

I was doodling little stars onto the inside jacket of my biology binder when I felt a surge of pain coupling with the pressure on my pelvis. I was distracted by my own world, so I hadn't noticed before how badly I had to use the bathroom.

Lifting my head from its rested position on my palm, I began to raise my hand to ask permission to leave the room. Mr. Brusly would most certainly allow me a trip to the restroom. After all, we both knew I wasn't learning anything in class anyway.

Nonetheless, instead of asking permission, I lowered my hand back onto the desktop and went back to drawing the little stars. Each star became less and less symmetrical as the pain increased and I began to wiggle in my seat. The proper thing to do was to simply ask to be excused from class, but I wouldn't put my hand back into the air.

"Are you alright?" Rainey asked me, leaning to the left to whisper across the aisle between us. I nodded with a pathetic smile. She didn't seem convinced, but returned to her note taking. She was a really smart kid. If it weren't for her notes, I would fail biology.

Rainey was distracting, and I had to focus all my attention on my bathroom needs at the moment. I blocked her out, as well as the rest of the class, and began to scribble unorganized shapes next to my little stars. My breathing became uneven and every so often my face would cringe. My muscles were too tense.

“Miss Cross,” Mr. Brusly’s irritated tone rang through the air. I looked up and saw him glowering at me from across the room, his jaw clenched shut. “If you aren’t going to pay attention, you are welcome to leave.”

That mild distraction was all it took. I blushed and lowered my head and forgot about the contracted muscles I was supposed to keep in check. Before I realized entirely what was happening, the seat of my underwear was already damp and I couldn’t regain control of my body. Within seconds the baby blue panties I had put on this morning were completely saturated, then the back of my jeans, and before long I was sitting in the center of my biology classroom with a puddle of my own urine on the floor around my chair.

“Molly just pissed her pants!” a boy screamed from behind me. I felt tears fill my eyes.

“Damn,” said another boy to my left. “He’s not kidding! Look!”

Soon the entire classroom was gawking and pointing at me, either laughing openly or snickering to themselves. The boys started a chant, “Molly pissed her pants! Molly pissed her pants!” The girls giggled, some of them joining in and some of them already sending text messages beneath their desks.

Mr. Brusly composed himself of the initial shock before saying, “Molly, go get yourself cleaned up.” After I sat there for a few moments, stunned by my humiliation, he added ‘Now!’

I finally managed to get a hold of myself and, grabbing my backpack and binder as quickly as I could, dashed out of the classroom only to hear an uproar from the class upon seeing the dark spot on the back of my jeans.

Ironically, the first place I thought to run was the bathroom. I dashed in, slammed shut a stall door, and started to cry. My solitary weeping lasted all of thirty seconds before I heard footsteps.

“Molly,” Rainey’s voice echoed off the walls, “are you alright?”

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t find words to answer her question appropriately, because ‘no’ doesn’t seem like a powerful enough response to how I was feeling. Instead, I continued to cry and she talked through the door.

“It’s not a big deal,” Rainey lied to me. “This sort of thing happens all the time. We’re in high school; people will forget about it in a day or so. Some new big thing will come up. No one even knows who you are. You should stop worrying.”

“You don’t understand, Rainey,” I whispered, although we were alone.

“Open the door,” she said politely. The sympathy rang through her voice. I couldn’t say no.

The door opened the second Rainey heard the metallic click of the lock being turned, and in she came to take my hand. “Pat dry what you can and I will hold your jeans up to the blow dryer until the spot goes away. When you can be seen in the halls again we’ll head to the office to call your mom.”

I nodded and gave her a tight hug, careful not to let my jeans touch her clothes. Afterward I returned to the stall and proceeded with Rainey’s plan. The end result was myself in uncomfortable damp underwear and socially appropriate looking jeans. This plan would work.

I took Rainey’s hand as we walked out of the bathroom. As we went through the hall, a few people smirked and several giggled and some pointed and made comments to their friends that were inaudible to me. I began to feel anxious and I clung tighter to Rainey’s hand.

“Relax,” she whispered in my ear. “No one cares.”

Then a boy I recognized from my biology class walked up to me and, creating an unrealistic presentation of losing his balance, splashed water on the front of my jeans. “Oh, sorry about that,” the boy said with a chuckle. “But I suppose you’re used to it.”

New tears began to form in my eyes as Rainey pulled me past the boy and the new crowd of laughing students toward the office. Rainey opened the door for me and I sat down in the one of the chairs.

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“Yes Miss Cross?” he asked me, intrigued. The idea of me actually having a question about what he was teaching surprised him.

“May I use the restroom?” I asked politely.

He sighed and nodded, pointing to the hall pass hanging from a lanyard on a hook by the door. I stood, snatched it off the wall, and headed down the hallway to the bathrooms.

I returned a few minutes later, put the pass back in its rightful place, and returned to my seat. Instead of opening up my biology notebook again, I withdrew a small black spiral bound book from my backpack and opened it up to a fresh page.

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I was in biology earlier, and I needed to use the bathroom so badly. I almost asked to be excused, but maybe I thought I could hold it. Whatever the reason, I waited until I couldn't hold it anymore and wet my pants. The whole class was laughing at me. I ran to the bathroom and cried and Rainey helped me dry my pants. But then a boy spilled water on them and mocked me. Rainey kept me from crying though. The rest of school wasn't that bad, but sitting in wet underwear was so uncomfortable.

I closed the small black book of all my daydreams and tossed it onto the desk to my right. Rainey is the only person I let read it.

Chapter Two

“I just got out of school,” I spoke into the receiver on my cell. “If you need me to, I can stop by on my way home.”

Rainey gave me a curious look.

“Alright, see you soon. Goodbye.” I flipped my phone shut.

“Who was that?” Rainey asked as soon as I put the phone in my pocket.

“My mom,” I replied with a groan. “She’s not feeling well. Do you mind if we stop by Serendipity and buy some Advil or something?”

Rainey shook her head. She never had anything to do. I thanked her and took a right at the next street corner, off our usual route.

Serendipity, a local convenient store, was only a few blocks out of the way and very convenient indeed. It was a bit larger than most stores of its type and stocked a much wider variety, including extraneous things such as small furniture, antiques, and a few trendy shirts. Since I could remember, Serendipity was always my shopping sanctuary when I was in a pinch.

I stepped into the familiar store, brushing the flakes of snow off the shoulders of my heavy winter coat before they had a chance to melt under the warm lights. Instinctively, my feet took me to the pharmacy to pick up the cough medicine my mom needed, but not before Rainey made me browse through all the new shirts.

“What’s so wrong with this one?” she said after I gave a deep sigh. She was holding up a lavender turtleneck.

“It’s not your color,” I lied. Rainey was a very attractive girl, and I was just a bit envious. I didn’t like shopping with her for that reason. She made everything look good, which took its toll on my self-esteem.

“I need some makeup,” Rainey called from behind a coat rack. “I’ll meet you at the checkout.”

“Grab me some lip gloss,” I called back, making my way to the medicines. It took me all of thirty seconds to find exactly what my mom needed. She was often sick, so I had come to realize what was best for her under specific conditions. Then I started making my way through the closest aisle toward the checkout.

I glanced over the shelves like I always did when I walked through stores to see if anything would catch my eye. Unexpectedly, among all the baby diapers and jars of strained food, I felt an urge to purchase something. I quickly looked around cautiously, noticing no one, and then stepped closer to examine.

Between the teething rings and baby bottles was a row of Playtex pacifiers, all in either a different color or design. The front of the plastic encasings informed me that they were made of latex and intended for toddlers, according to the size. I took another glance at each end of the aisle before fingering through each package individually.

The fourth pacifier had a pale pink butterfly-wing shaped shield with a white protruded oval, holding not only the latex bulb of the pacifier to the other side but also a tiny circular handle in place on the front. My eyes glazed over it, feeling a twinge of excitement. I snatched the package from off the shelf and continued toward the checkout lanes.

“Will this do?” Rainey called from my side, making me jump. I quickly switched the medicine and pacifier to the opposite hand in attempt to hide my spontaneous purchase from my best friend.

I nodded after looking over the lip gloss she had picked out. She got my shade right. She had also found herself a tube of mascara and portable mirror.

“Do you have money with you?” I asked curiously. She nodded, which surprised me. Often Rainey was broke and as a result I would pay for her things. It never seemed to bother me as much as it should.

We were next in line, and I hadn’t a clue what to do. I most certainly couldn’t buy the pacifier with Rainey standing next to me. She would question it and I hadn’t any plausible excuse for my purchase. I had to think on my toes.

“I can cover your stuff,” I smiled in her direction as the cashier in front of me returned the change to the customer. “Go grab us a few drinks from the cooler too. Hurry up!”

Rainey dashed toward the other end of the store, which is where the chilled beverages were stored. This gave me just enough time to process my transaction.

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I glanced over the shelves like I always did when I walked through stores to see if anything would catch my eye. My glance rolled over the bottles, then the pacifiers, then the teething rings. I kept my feet moving forward toward the cash registers.

“Will this do?” Rainey called from my side, appearing out of the blue. I nodded after looking over the lip gloss she had picked out. She got my shade right. She had also found herself a tube of mascara and portable mirror.

“Want me to pay?” I offered. She nodded sheepishly. She hardly had any money and I hated letting her waste it on makeup.

“Hello again,” the clerk smiled at me. She was an attractive brown haired girl, not much older than me by the looks of it. She behaved very politely, taking much care to engage with the customer: a model employee. Her name tag read Kelsey.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly with a heavy accent of confusion. “I haven’t met you before.” She looked me over and pondered little questions in her head.

“I apologize then,” she said. “You look an awful lot like someone else I rang up the other day.”

“Linda usually rings me up,” I said matter-of-factly. “Doesn’t she work weekdays until eight thirty?”

“Oh,” the clerk chimed. “Linda was promoted last week. I’m new here. My name is Kelsey.” She pointed to her name tag.

“I’m Molly,” I responded plainly.

“Yeah, that wasn’t it,” she said more to herself. “I can’t remember, but the girl you look like wasn’t named Molly. Sorry for the confusion.”

We continued superficial conversation for a few minutes, Kelsey and I. No one was behind us in line so I didn’t feel bad, although Rainey had hardly gotten a word in. We talked about Linda a little. She was a very nice middle-aged woman. Occasionally she’d give me a discount on certain items, like if I was buying school supplies. She always asked how I was doing in school. I was really happy she got promoted, although I’d miss seeing her every day.

Kelsey was genuinely nice though. It wasn’t just the employee courtesy. I also learned she went to the same school as me, although she was a senior and I was only a sophomore. Still, maybe Kelsey wouldn’t be a bad replacement for Linda.

When I finally left Serendipity, I reached into the bag and handed Rainey the items I had bought for her. She thanked me again, like she always did. When we got in front of my house, Rainey and I said goodbye and she started heading home on her own.

I got inside, took my coat off, and rubbed my palms together so they would warm up quicker. Then I set my backpack on the table and pulled out the small black spiral bound diary and clicked the top of my pen.

I always felt silly showing Rainey the daydreams that involved babyish items, but it was a common theme and Rainey never seemed to judge. Sometimes she would even tease me, but I never took offense. Rainey had a knack for doing things in such a way that you could never be upset with her. I wonder if she’d tease me for this one.

Chapter Three

It was the first day of Christmas vacation, and the term excited couldn't even begin to describe what I was. Rainey and I decided to go sledding, which is something everyone should do at least once a winter.

Completely dressed in my snow pants, winter coat, boots, mittens, and hat, I headed out into the cold, grabbing my sled on the way out of the garage. Rainey and I met up at the sidewalk corner and walked together to the hill down the street.

"Is your mom feeling any better?" she asked with mild concern.

"The medicine always helps. She should be fine by Christmas."

"Which reminds me, what are you getting me?" Rainey hated surprises. She was a terribly impatient person and preferred knowing things right away.

"I don't know yet. What are you getting me?"

"On the contrary, I already got your gifts." That took me by surprise. Rainey was one to procrastinate. It surprised me enough not to notice the plural right away.

"Gifts?" I asked.

"Well one's more of a joke. You'll appreciate it." She smiled and I smiled back.

When we finally arrived at the hill we noticed how many other people had the same idea as us. It was a big hill though, so we found room.

It was nearly two hours later that I started to do the little dance I often did when I was in need of a restroom. After sliding down the hill one more time I went up to Rainey and tugged her sleeve with my mitten.

"Can we go home now?" I asked in a sing-song baby voice. "I gots to go potty."

"Of course, sweetheart," she replied. "I don't want you getting your snow pants all wet."

With that said I sat back in my sled and she began to pull me back down the road to my house. I wiggled and rocked the sled back and forth, making whiny noises every now and then. Rainey kept telling me that we were almost there, even when we weren't.

Upon entering my driveway, Rainey helped me up out of the sled and walked me, my mitten in hers, up into my house. She unzipped my jacket and took my hat off and mittens and told me to sit on the couch. After I did, she unzipped the sides of my boots and slipped them off as well. Next, she unbuckled the overall straps on my snow pants and pushed them down to my ankles, much to my embarrassment since I never wore my jeans with snow pants, leaving me in my underwear and t-shirt in front of her.

“Hurry up, now” she said, turning me so I faced the hallway and patted the seat of my panties. I scurried off to the bathroom before I had an accident.

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It was nearly two hours later that I started to do the little dance I often did when I was in need of a restroom. After sliding down the hill one more time I went up to Rainey and tapped her shoulder with my mitten.

“We should be heading back soon,” I said. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

We did one more round on the hill where Rainey managed to stay standing on her sled (I don't have that sort of balance) before we began trudging home through the snow, pulling our sleds behind us.

Upon entering my driveway, I left my sled behind and hurried up to the garage door, leaving it open for Rainey who was a few steps behind me. I took off my mittens and hat first, and then unzipped my jacket and boots, getting all my winter clothes but the snow pants off of me before Rainey could even shake the snowflakes off.

After I came out of the bathroom, the snow pants buckled back over my shoulders, I went into the backpack I left by the door and pulled out my spiral bound diary.

“Oh, story time,” Rainey said in a teasing tone.

I rolled my eyes and opened the book to a new page and began to write in what I remembered of Rainey's babysitting.

Chapter Four

“Your daydreams are sort of adorable,” Rainey chuckled on the couch as I put *The Princess Bride* into the DVD player.

“They’re ridiculous,” I stated lightly, taking my seat next to her.

“Not really,” she replied, eating a handful of popcorn before continuing. “To each their own, and your own is wanting some baby toys to fiddle with.”

“I’m sixteen, and I don’t want baby toys. The daydreams just happen. I don’t really think about it.”

Rainey dropped it after that. I’m glad too. I was getting worried she was beginning to think these dreams meant something. I didn’t want her reading into it. They weren’t important. Aside from the daydreams, I never thought about being younger.

Two movies and three packages of popcorn later, my eyes began to droop. Rainey was a night owl, so she popped in another movie. I let my head slip down onto her shoulder before closing my eyes.

“You need to get up,” Rainey said in a hushed voice. I winced at the light as my eyes slid open, and closed them again. “Hurry, your mom is going to wake up soon.”

I yawned and sat up, rubbing my eyes with the side of my hand. I finally managed to get them open and adjusted to the morning light. Rainey hovered over me, an anxious look on her face.

“What is it?” I asked with minimal concern, unable to put forth any real emotion at this stage of awakening.

“You sort of wet the bed,” Rainey said in a whisper, then glanced at the staircase. After a moment of processing I looked down at the couch, and sure enough, the pajama pants I put on last night as well as the basement sofa were damp.

“I don’t remember this,” I whispered back, unable to put forth how truly embarrassed I was having just awoken.

“Most people don’t remember nighttime accidents,” Rainey said with a bit of impatience. “If you don’t want your mom seeing, you need to go get changed. Let me worry about the couch.” I hadn’t noticed until she motioned toward them, but she already had a spray bottle and

scrub brush on the end table. I stood slowly, still groggy and confused, and made my way toward my room.

Upon moving into this house, I voluntarily chose the storeroom in the basement to be my bedroom. There was an extra room on the top floor, but the storeroom was twice as big and added an element of privacy, so my mom used the spare room as a craft area. Plus, I had the perks of being a hallway away from the entertainment center my mom thought wise to put in the basement.

I opened my door and noticed my blankets a mess. Rainey never made the bed and there wasn't room on the couch for two. I'd make it later. I had other things to worry about.

It took no time at all to slip the wet clothes off and replace them with new pajamas. I did my own laundry so none of this would be much of a problem. I threw the saturated clothes into my hamper, tidied my bed, and went out to check on Rainey.

She was waiting for me on the couch opposite the one I slept on. The couch had a large discolored spot on it still, but it was likely from the chemicals. I leaned down, kissed Rainey on the cheek, and whispered a small thank you.

"You need to get up," Rainey said in a hushed voice. I winced at the light as my eyes slid open, and closed them again. "Hurry, your mom is waiting for you upstairs."

I yawned and sat up, rubbing my eyes with the side of my hand. I finally managed to get them open and adjusted to the morning light. Rainey hovered over me, an excited look on her face.

"What is it?" I asked with minimal concern, unable to put forth any real emotion at this stage of awakening.

"You are going shopping today," Rainey said with glee, then motioned at the staircase. After a moment of processing I remembered that today my mother and I decided we'd go Christmas shopping, and I still needed to get Rainey a gift.

"You have to go home," I said slowly, forcing myself to stand up and move toward my room. "You're certainly not going with me." I knew she wanted to.

"That's hardly fair," she said with an attitude.

"I didn't go with you when you got my present." I slipped out of my pajamas and into some jeans, and then changed my shirt. Rainey watched me. I'm not very shy around her.

“Please can I go?” she begged.

“We’re exchanging gifts early anyway,” I said, running a brush through my hair and tossing it onto my otherwise tidy bed. “You’re going away for the holiday so we’re doing gifts on the twenty-third.”

“That’s two full days away!”

“You’re not tagging along,” I said with all seriousness, grabbing my black notebook and walking past her and out the doorway. “Keep nagging and you won’t get to read my new entry when I get back.”

“You’ll let me anyway,” she said matter-of-factly. She was right, but I still wasn’t letting her come.

Chapter Five

“Don’t you have a boy you want to get a gift for?” my mom asked me as we wandered around the mall.

“No, Mom,” I repeated for the fifth time this afternoon.

“Why haven’t you had a boyfriend yet? You’re a sophomore.”

“I haven’t found one I like.” Or one that likes me.

“Well I’m going to pick up your cousin something in the toy store,” she said with a sigh. “Meet me at Sydney’s in an hour.” That was the café our little town of Laramie placed in the center of its mall. It was a good rendezvous point for when my mother and I split up to shop.

I inched my way toward Hot Topic, getting the awkward stares I always got walking into that place, even when I was with Rainey. She had more of the punk style, while I got most of my clothes in the juniors section at Pennies, and nothing stands out more than a pale pink off-brand Abercrombie tee in the middle of what might as well be Rainey’s secondary home.

I went toward the hair accessories first, having a long standing tradition to, whenever possible, purchase something to keep Rainey’s dark brown bangs out of her hazel eyes. It wasn’t hard to find things Rainey liked in a place like this. I could have been kidnapped from the store at that moment, a dark garbage bag pulled over my face, and whatever my failing limbs knocked from the shelves still would have been the perfect gift for my indifferent friend.

In the end, I settled on a cheap barrette, knowing it would go without use, a t-shirt for Taking Back Sunday, her favorite band for their first two albums, and a black lace corset she'd been eyeing for about four and a half months but never had the money to buy. It totaled slightly over what Rainey and I agreed to spend on each other, but I always went overboard on gifts.

I still had a half hour to kill before meeting up with my mom, and I had run out of people to shop for. It was a curse and a blessing having only one real friend. I ended up spending my remaining time in the bookstore, scouting for a cover that caught my eye.

And a cover did just that; it was revamped due to the recent release of a movie based off the classic. I took a seat next to the shelves and opened *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. I found my eyes glaze across the figures of black commentary, ignored, and rest softly on the detailed drawings. Everything was rather colorful, in a faded nighttime sort of way.

I finally finished the story, or what I inferred the story to be from examining the artwork, and closed the back cover. Looking up, I noticed a few people glancing down at me with a concerned look. I had first thought it was because I was reading a children's book on the floor of the store, but then realized I had been sucking my thumb the whole time. Standing quickly, I blushed a deep pink, replaced the book on the shelf, and hurried back into the mall plaza.

I still had a half hour to kill before meeting up with my mom, and I had run out of people to shop for. It was a curse and a blessing having only one real friend. I ended up spending my remaining time in the bookstore, scouting for a cover that caught my eye, but unfortunately not one did.

I had a knack for reading a book when I could find the time, though recently I haven't felt interested in much of anything. I thought of the main character as some sort of irrational alter-life I had in some far off dimension, where perhaps I was someone more important. Rainey, however, found reading to be a chore. However, she loved television. I just don't understand her. Not long ago, television was called books.

I met up with my mother at Sydney's as we arranged. We each bought a cinnamon bun along with a coffee for her and a hot chocolate for me. No matter what anyone says, nothing can top a Sydney's hot chocolate on a snowy Michigan evening.

We arrived home later than expected and Rainey was nowhere to be seen. I thought for sure she would stop by to pester me about her gift. She must have gotten caught up in something.

I pulled out my black spiral notebook from my bag and a pen from my pocket.

“What are you writing?” my mom asked, glancing over.

“Nothing important,” I replied with a soft smile. She would never understand.

Chapter Six

The next night was strange. I had a dream, but I didn’t remember it. But I knew I dreamt something. When I woke up I was still tired, even though I’d slept for at least nine hours. I thought perhaps a shower would wake me up, but I couldn’t find the motivation to take one.

Rainey showed up in the middle of the afternoon, like always, knocking at the door wall that led from the basement to the backyard. Our house is on a hill, so the basement, although underground from the front of the house, is accessible from the back.

“You feeling okay?” she asked me after I greeted her unenthusiastically. I nodded in response.

She sat next to me and held my hand. She looked nervous. Or perhaps she looked concerned since that’s not the same thing. I couldn’t remember caring much though. I didn’t feel awake. My body was still and solid. We stayed like that for hours.

“I’m going to get you some food,” she said in a whisper, perhaps not to startle me after such a long silence. I nodded graciously, although I felt like the gratitude didn’t show. She walked upstairs. I sat alone.

Perhaps I fell asleep again, since the next thing I remember was laying in the tub in the bathroom adjacent my bedroom. I tried to sit up, but my hands were tied together with strips of turquoise cloth. I felt out of breath and out of energy. My head was throbbing.

Then a hand gripped the skin on my hip and I realized I wasn’t wearing any clothes. I attempted again at getting up, but my muscles failed me. Someone was talking, but I couldn’t concentrate on anything but the pulsing of my temples.

Something cold slipped into my rear and I screamed. No sounds came out, but I know I screamed. I couldn’t tell if it was my voice that wouldn’t work or my ears. The icy feeling fled quickly as warm fluid pumped its way into my body. I tried screaming again with the same result. It wasn’t long until pain shot through my torso and I began to twitch. The searing pain of my head was then accompanied by the pain in my abdomen. I felt tears on my cheeks.

She sat next to me and held my hand. She looked nervous. Or perhaps she looked concerned since that's not the same thing. I couldn't stop crying. My body was aching and trembling. We stayed like that for hours.

I finally pulled myself together and managed to stop my tears. The sun had gone down. The day had already past and I was just waking up. Whatever dream I can't remember having never let me wake up until I finished it.

"Thank you," I whispered to Rainey, who was still cradling my head on her shoulder.

"Did a daydream cause all of this?" she asked me with masked fear.

"No, I was asleep. It was just a nightmare."

Chapter Seven

Rainey didn't stay the night. I had probably freaked her out, and after I assured her I was alright, she took leave. Then I returned to my DVD player and started *The Princess Bride* for perhaps the thousandth time. It was my favorite movie. I still felt tired, but it faded as the movie progressed, and around the time they'd entered the fire swamp I was on the edge of the couch like I'd never watched it before.

For what was left of my evening, the night that followed, and a portion of the next morning, I was quite alert and alive. The headache I acquired from the crying spell dissipated by the end of the movie and I was left to focus on other things. I flipped on the stereo system and connected my off-brand MP3 player, running the battery dry on shuffle for eight and a half hours while I fiddled with my collection of Lego building blocks and coloring books I had put away for storage when we had moved.

I felt happy, a sincere emotion I hadn't encountered in quite some time, perhaps not since we'd moved to this house last year. I wished Rainey had stayed. She would have been proud of my spontaneous recovery.

I fingered through every page of my coloring books, ripping out every picture I liked, and went forth to color code each with my 124 piece Crayola crayon set, which by the end of the night had been worn down to nothing but scraps of paper and butts that I no longer found useful. I had taken the completed drawings, precisely coated in colored wax corresponding accurately to the covers of each book, and thumb-tacked them to the wall of my bedroom shared by the headboard of my bed frame.

Afterward I poured the contents of three twenty-five gallon bins, full to the brim with Legos, onto the carpeted floor of my room. Organizing the smaller pieces from the larger, I used the latter to construct an adequately sized nightstand for my room that the creators of Lego Land would be proud of. With the smaller pieces, I built a quaint town on top of the table, consisting of only four houses, six people, and two cars since that's all I could make with what I had remaining after building a life size piece of furniture.

I called it a night with my head euphoric and my fingers aching. The wall looked so pretty with all the added color, and I whispered a small goodnight to my miniature friends: Ida, Yogi, Annabelle, Neville, Roland, and Ellyn. Then my eyes closed.

“We’ll never survive.”

“Nonsense, you’re only saying that because no one ever has.”

And Westley was right, as he typically was, and both made it successfully through the fire swamp with only a few incidents. And the rest of the movie played out exactly as I remembered, not that I expected anything to have changed.

By the time it was over, I could already tell that for what was left of my evening, the night that followed, and a portion of the next morning, I would be quite alert and alive. The headache I acquired from the crying spell dissipated by the end of the movie and I was left to focus on other things.

I stood up, paced casually to my room, and picked up the black spiral notebook and the adjacent pen. Then, after standing awkwardly for a moment or two and pondering, I set them both back on my dresser and went to storage, dragging out three large bins and a box of coloring books.

Chapter Eight

The twenty-third had arrived, and along with it came the anticipation of what Rainey had gotten me for our first Christmas together. She arrived later than scheduled, which was a positive ordeal considering I slept until two in the afternoon after my long night.

“Damn,” she mumbled in awe, gazing at my wall. “Were you up all night coloring?”

I pulled a sweater over my head, having just gotten out of the shower.

“There must be a hundred pictures up on the wall, and they’re all in the lines and everything.”

“Eighty-nine,” I corrected her.

“Why not make it an even hundred?” she asked with mild curiosity, still examining the rainbow paper correlation.

“I just colored the ones I liked.”

She finally averted her eyes toward the Lego nightstand, seemingly less impressed although it took me longer. “You already have a nightstand you know,” she said instead.

“I didn’t have enough to build a couch.”

“Witty today, aren’t you?”

I smiled. It’s true; I had woken up in a good mood after my night of nothing but coloring and building. My fingertips burned in a way they used to burn when I first picked up a guitar. Nonetheless, nothing could break my spirits.

“So when do we open gifts?” she asked with great excitement.

“We could do it now if you’d like.”

She grinned and ran out into the entertainment room, climbing behind the TV and pulling out two medium sized boxes, covered elegantly in wrapping paper and ribbon.

“You hid my presents in my own house?” I asked dumbfounded.

“You didn’t find them, did you?” She had a point. I hadn’t expected them to be here or I would have looked around.

“You first,” I said, holding out the grocery bag I had stuffed the three wrapped packages inside. She didn’t object. She took out the corset first, to no surprise since it was the biggest. I also knew it was the one she would be most excited over. And she was indeed. She jumped up and down and hugged me and thanked me so many times I had lost count. She nearly went to try it on right there, but I reminded her of the other gifts which she also thanked me for, even the barrette, but with much less enthusiasm.

My gifts were next, and I first started with the smaller package, much to what seemed like disappointment from Rainey’s expression. I suppose the bigger package was the joke gift

she was excited about. And I should have opened the larger gift first, because the smaller gift made me stop breathing.

Beneath the red ribbons and penguin wrapping paper was a small, wooden music box. And even though it obviously wasn't new or beautiful, the sound it emitted when opened was reason enough to die right there, that melody in my ear and nothing else. I did my best not to breathe, not wanting to disrupt the sound with any additional noise. Even Rainey held her breath. But, unfortunately, my head became lighter and my resistance against oxygen was short lived. Hence is the course of nature.

I didn't fuss as Rainey had. I wasn't that sort of girl. She knew I was very thankful though. I cried. It seems pathetic to cry over something like the sound a music box makes when opened, but that didn't stop me.

Aside from my one thank you, we were quiet for quite some time before she urged me to open the second present. I was expecting a can of snakes to spring out and startle me or a box of Midol, but that wasn't what I got. In reality, Rainey's joke was very well thought out and quite amusing.

She had gotten me a thirteen count pack of L/XL Huggies Goodnites underpants: a sort of pull-up intended for older kids up to around age eleven or so. It took me a minute to realize what Rainey had meant, and then I laughed. She laughed too.

"I figure, better safe than sorry, right?" Rainey said while chuckling. "Don't need the school mocking you or me having to hang your snow pants out to dry."

"Hey, if you keep teasing me you won't be allowed to read about my daydreams," I said in a mock-threatening tone.

"Oh, you love it," she giggled.

I rolled my eyes. "You didn't waste too much money on these, right?"

"Nah, they were on sale," she said with a shrug. "It was funnier than Midol though, right?" She can probably read minds. Chalk that up on her list of things she's good at.

"So, what are we going to do now?" I pondered aloud.

"Well," she began slowly, "I'm going to try on this corset, because if you got me the wrong size I'm going to hurt you." With that, she leapt up and walked toward the bathroom.

I took my music box and package of Goodnites and went into my room, stuffing the pull-ups in the top drawer of my dresser and setting the music box in the middle of my Lego town after moving Roland out of the way.

I sat down on my bed and looked at the wall of pictures I had colored. They really were beautiful. I would never take them down if I could help it.

Rainey came back in with her corset on, smiling ear to ear. It must've fit well. She walked over to me sitting on the bed and pushed me down softly so my back pressed against my comforter. Then she slipped her hand up my thigh and pressed it against my crotch. Needless to say, I was taken aback.

“Why didn't you put your pull-up on?” Rainey asked in all seriousness, her smile fading quickly.

“I didn't know I was s'posed to,” I said in a childish accent, sweat forming beads on my forehead.

Before I had the chance to explain myself, my body was flipped over and her hand came down hard on my rear. At first it was the sound that surprised me, but after a while my skin became tender and I felt the sting of her hand on my butt. I whimpered in pain, apologizing over and over. After a minute my apologies stilled, and I sincerely wished I'd had a Goodnite on after all since it would've meant been more padding between her hand and my skin.

I took my music box and package of Goodnites and went into my room, stuffing the pull-ups in the top drawer of my dresser and setting the music box in the middle of my Lego town after moving Roland out of the way.

I sat down on my bed and looked at the wall of pictures I had colored. They really were beautiful. I would never take them down if I could help it.

Rainey came back in with her corset on, smiling ear to ear. It must've fit well. She walked over to me sitting on the bed and took a seat beside me.

“Would you ever spank me?” I asked her with mild concern.

“Is that an invitation?” she asked me with a raised eyebrow.

We both laughed.

Chapter Nine

It was Christmas Eve, Rainey was gone, and I was lonely. I hadn't anything to do. My mom had decorated the house. The tree may not have been real, since my mom is a cleanly person and cleanly people are not fond of pine needles on their carpet, but it was gorgeous. If my mom ever takes up a second job, it should be a professional tree decorator, although it seems like there would be a lot of dry months with no income.

The stockings, only my mother's and mine, were hung down the staircase since we didn't have a fireplace. It made me wonder what she would have told me as a child if this was the house we lived in back then. Certainly Santa would never use the front door. And if she had used that line, I'd check for sleigh tracks the next morning. You can never check for tracks on the roof. That's probably why it's such a good alibi.

Everything around the house, all the decorations and trinkets and garland and the outdoor lights as well, were all perfectly in place with one exception: my Christmas gifts. I had placed my mother's gift from me under the tree last week, wrapped and waiting. She, however, found that making me wait until the last minute to analyze the size of my boxes somehow multiplied the suspense, when in reality I already know what she got me since she always leaves the presents unwrapped in her closet up until the week of Christmas. This year's big gift was a miniature fridge, presumably for my bedroom.

It made me wonder why we put on this huge façade. We never have anyone come over on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Our relatives used to visit before we moved but the drive is too much of a chore for them, and my mother and I usually can't make it back home this time of year because holidays are a big deal at her work. She is the only flouriest in miles that carry poinsettias, and what I've learned is that no Christmas is Christmas without a poinsettia. That's the rule when you have a flouriest as a mother. But I suppose all the décor is out of habit. My mother never did kick a habit well.

So all I did for Christmas Eve was lounge around my own home, hum Christmas carols that played softly on the radio, and chalk up two more run-throughs of *The Princess Bride*. It was uneventful to say the least. It only made me miss Rainey more and more.

But Christmas morning was a brilliant ordeal. Last I recall I fell asleep in the basement, but that didn't stop me from tiptoeing down a flight of stairs in my light purple footed pajamas, the zipper pulled high to my neck. My hair was tucked out of my face into two pigtails, lying loosely on my shoulders. The tree shined more beautiful than ever, only outranked by the appealing glow of the hundreds of toys beneath the tree.

In a heartbeat, I was at the foot of the stairs ripping open the gifts one at a time, breaking plastic seals and leaving trash scattered on the carpet. I didn't finger through the new coloring

books or stack the Lincoln Logs or push Polly's Mini Cooper across the room. I just opened gift after gift, squealing in an excited voice as I saw what was beneath each wrapping job. It took me hours to finish all the gifts. Santa had done a wonderful job this year.

But Christmas morning was a disappointing ordeal. Last I recall I dreamt a day filled with warm feet in zip up pajamas and an endless sea of glistening paper. What I got was a mini fridge with a big red bow sitting on top of my dresser, plugged in and running. I could have gotten up to a cold beverage if I had wanted to, but the only thing on my mind was the dream I woke from. For the first time ever I wasn't able to make my daydream a reality, and the worst part is, for once I really wanted to.

Chapter Ten

My sleepiness began to fade, but the disappointment did not. I slowly pulled my body up the stairs, walking into the kitchen where my mother was drinking her morning coffee.

"Merry Christmas," she said, enthused. It must have been her second cup.

"Merry Christmas," I responded in a groggy tone.

"Did you see your gift?" she asked me politely.

I nodded. It was hard to feign excitement.

"You like it, right?" She sounded upset. I didn't want to upset her.

"Of course, Mom," I said. "Just didn't sleep well." I hated lying to her, but I hated telling her the truth more. It's a shame it had to come out in the end.

"Well take a seat and I'll get you some pancakes," she said cautiously. Perhaps I hurt her feelings after all. That wasn't my goal.

"I'm not very hungry right now, Mom," I said quietly and took a seat anyway. I wasn't sleepy anymore. I was just depressed. All I kept thinking about was the temperature of my feet on the kitchen tile.

She took a seat across from me. "I need to talk to you about something."

She was hesitant. That's a bad sign.

“Yeah, what is it?” I asked with false curiosity.

“Well, last night when I was hooking that fridge up in your room, I came across something.”

The room fell quiet and I stopped drawing circles on the table with my index finger. I looked up to meet her eyes. My heart started pounding. She pushed my black spiral book across the table to me and I felt my body twitch internally, although I hadn't moved a muscle. I was racking my brain for an explanation. My head started to throb.

“These things you write about,” she began, but never finished.

“It's none of your business!” I shouted louder than I wanted to. My blood pressure was up. I felt in control, but I never willed myself to speak.

“Are these things happening to you?” she asked, trying to ignore my yelling. She obviously sensed I felt threatened.

“I said it's none of your damn business!” I tried to cover my mouth, but my hands didn't move. I don't swear, let alone at my mother. Something was wrong.

She sat still for a moment, watching me fume, before opening her mouth again only to be cut off.

“Why the hell were you going through my things?” I screamed.

“It was on top of the dresser I was setting up the fridge on,” she tried to explain, but I'd stopped listening by that point.

“Leave me the hell alone!” I snatched the book up, bolted down the stairs, and slammed my bedroom door shut. My limbs trembled, my cheeks covered in tears for talking to my mom like that.

“She shouldn't have seen it!” I thought out loud to myself. “She can't find it! She'll think something's wrong with me!”

I glided through the room, my fingertips touching everything they could, searching for something my eyes couldn't find. But I had little to no sense of touch. All the adrenaline infected my brain. I couldn't stop the trembling or the crying or the throbbing of my temples.

I stood on my bed, scratching at the coloring pages on the walls, smudging some pictures and ripping others, my fingertips burning from the friction. I didn't know what my fingers were

looking for, but the pictures weren't it, because soon they were in tatters on the carpeting. I tried to pick them up. My nails were chipped and broken, my fingertips bright red.

My headache got worse, searing the sides of my head with extreme heat. I gripped them, tugging on my hair, pulling out hundreds of strands. I felt drops of blood on my hands and quickly rubbed them against the carpet in an attempt to clean them off, but it only brought more blood, and the carpet grew red.

Using my sore fingertips, I picked apart the carpet in the corner of my room, ripping up shards until the whole floor came up with it. Fiddling for the notebook, now saturated in blood, I jammed it beneath the floor and folded the carpet back down, sitting in the corner and curling up my knees to my chest. I felt the blood drip down my cheeks from my temples as the headaches grew so bad my body went numb. My vision began to fail me and I found security in the darkness.

Why won't my arms move... I must be mostly-dead...

Chapter Eleven

The alarm brought me around, and with a flick of my wrist, off it went. I sat up, dazed, and rubbed the sleep from my eyes and brushed the dust off my brain as it started back up. My gaze slid over the shiny wood surfaces that reflected small beams from my nightlight. It took me much, much longer to stand up than any other morning I could remember.

I showered. The water was very warm, but it didn't soothe me. And instead of the droplets crashing into the ceramic tub I imagined the sounds of them hitting my metal body, as if I weren't real anymore. I felt like someone had shut me down.

I wrapped a towel around me, stepped into the cold, and felt no goose bumps. Even cold couldn't find me, wherever I was. No feeling could. And my mind wandered and then I stopped it. The doctor said I might feel like this. I needed to keep my emotions under control, or in this case, lack thereof.

I brushed my teeth slowly. The whole morning was slow, but I was still running on schedule because I couldn't find the motivation to do my hair or makeup properly. I still had enough time to eat breakfast before catching my bus if I kept up my pace, although my stomach felt very small and the concept of food didn't appeal to me. My mom would like me to eat though. That's how she indicates I'm getting better.

The towel went off of me and onto my bed, and I found that if I had any motivation to do anything that morning it was to put on clothes. I wasn't comfortable being naked, even in the solitude of my bedroom.

My fingertips, still a burnt pink color, opened first my underwear drawer. I rifled through the pairs of what I remember to be soft cotton but could no longer feel. My sense of touch had dimmed with my emotions. And I noticed a dull pink plastic near the bottom and tugged it out quixotically: a package of L/XL girls Goodnites pull-ups. I stood there until I lost track of time.

"Who is she?" I whispered to myself.

I walked over to the bed and tore the pink plastic, hoping my fingers wouldn't sting. But the numbness remained constant, at least until slipping one of the pull-ups out of the package.

It felt... I couldn't think of the word. But my off-color fingertips had sensations other than the searing pin needle feelings that I detested. I fiddled with the pull-up in both my palms, running it along my skin. I felt it everywhere the pull-up touched.

I finally let my mouth curl into a small, asymmetrical smile for the first time in weeks. Then, carefully, I stepped both feet into the pull-up and slid it up my legs, leaving it snug around my hips. Then I remembered the term comfortable, which is what the pull-ups were against my skin.

The rest of me was dressed in a flash, like the past two days and their impeccable slowness had to catch up to the rest of time. I was hungry, and I ate. The smell of bacon was intoxicating, and it was the first time since Christmas Eve my mom saw me smile. I felt proud to have made her happy.

Still, I wasn't happy yet. I knew the off-putting feeling I had would rewind my brain from this little daydream and I would go on to be the miserable kid I've been for so long. And I started to fear the moment it would happen.

But once I got outside my house and began my short walk to the bus stop, and boarded the bus, and arrived at school, and attended first hour, then second, and finally sat with an empty desk to my right in Mr. Brusly's class, I began to fear that my brain wouldn't rewind. But by the time I came to this realization, I'd already placed myself in the scenario of wearing a pull-up to school, and the anxiety began to build in my chest.

What I would give to start the whole day over again is not comprehensible.

Chapter Twelve

I wasn't fully aware what was going on in Mr. Brusly's biology class. I hardly ever took notes or paid attention, but this time I had just cause. My stomach began to flip as I tried to close my eyes and calm myself. I had grown so accustomed to the numbness, that having my first true emotion be anxiety through me for a loop.

I began doodling little stars onto the inside jacket of my biology binder, attempting to distract myself, but it wasn't even halfway through class when I felt a surge of pain coupling with the pressure on my pelvis. I was distracted by my anxiety, so I hadn't noticed before how badly I had to use the bathroom.

Lifting my head from its rested position on my palm, I began to raise my hand to ask permission to leave the room, but instead I lowered it back onto the desktop and went back to drawing the little stars. Each star became less and less symmetrical as the pain increased and I began to wiggle in my seat. The proper thing to do was to simply ask to be excused from class, but I wouldn't put my hand back into the air.

“Are you alright?”

I looked up in disbelief, but it was Mr. Brusly who had asked. I nodded reluctantly and fidgeted in my chair.

“Do you need to use the restroom,” he asked, based on my mannerisms no doubt. I nodded.

He pointed to the hall pass hanging from a lanyard on a hook by the door. I stood, snatched it off the wall, and headed down the hallway to the bathrooms.

Chapter Thirteen

Looking at the pull-up around my ankles, I felt like crying. Today had been a treacherous rush of emotions. I almost wished to go back to the numb depression I'd suffered in recently.

After a long while sitting on the toilet and debating my options, I cursed at myself for ever putting the pull-up on to begin with and stepped out of the bathroom fully clad, embarrassing undergarment and all.

I hadn't noticed before in my euphoric, dream-like state of mind, but people were staring at me. After Mr. Brusly's class I walked down the hall toward third hour and found at least half the student body making sideways glances in my direction. Initially, I adjusted my jeans and

pulled my shirt down far past my waistline. If anyone had noticed I wore a pull-up to school, I'd be known for the next two and a half years of high school as the oversized baby.

Third hour came and went uneventfully, and then I headed toward the cafeteria for lunch. My mom paid for my lunch, which meant I had to get in line and wait for a majority of the time I had to eat simply to get my food. But today, after five minutes, I stepped out of line and headed toward the bathroom, uncomfortable with all the staring eyes. I wasn't very hungry anyway.

I spent ten minutes inspecting myself in the mirror. My jeans were tight, but the pull-up was small. I left no excess bulges or padding that couldn't be mistaken as me wearing panties. Then I checked the waistband of my jeans, which covered the pull-up completely since they were intended for a young child. Then I went into a stall, took off my jeans, and examined for holes, but upon finding none I went back to the lunchroom and sulked in a corner.

"They must know, somehow," I told myself in a quiet tone, afraid and holding back tears. "Why did I do this?"

Even in the corner people managed to find me and whisper amongst their friends, and when the bell rang I was the first one to leave the cafeteria, eager to get to my next class and get this day over with.

But my next class was physical education, and I didn't quite consider having to change clothes this morning when I dressed. At first I figured, since I left lunch so early, no one would be in the locker room yet, but I was wrong. Three girls were already in there socializing, and I slowly sulked back into the hallway. I stood there until the bell for class rang.

"And why haven't you changed into your gym clothes?" Ms. Callahan, the girl's P.E. teacher, asked. I shrugged, unable to come up with a proper excuse. My day was going downhill fast, and I just wanted to disappear.

"I don't feel well," I said quietly, knowing wholeheartedly that I wasn't lying.

"If you sit out, you get a zero for the day," she said with a shrug. She obviously didn't want to deal with me, and I wasn't particularly fond of dealing with her either.

"Alright," I said and took a seat against the wall in the hallway as she walked back into the locker room.

I sat there in the hallway, quietly going over the events of the day in my head, and how all the inevitable teasing that will occur for the rest of my high school career could have been avoided if, like a normal 16 year old girl, I would have put on a pair of panties this morning.

Chapter Fourteen

I sat alone and wallowed in my own self-pity, at least thankful to feel self-pity instead of the numb depression I'd grown used to, until a tall brown-haired girl walked over and sat next to me.

"Hello," she said, as chipper as the birds in the morning. I detested her optimism at a time like this.

"Hi," I said quietly and absentmindedly.

"It starts with an R," she said more like a question than a statement.

I gave her a curious look.

"Your name," she smiled.

"It starts with an M," I said and looked at her face once over. I knew her.

"It starts with an M, huh?" She looked very confused, sounding out the letter M out loud.

"Molly," I said with a sigh. "Molly Cross."

She snapped her fingers. "Molly!"

"And you are?" I asked semi-interested.

"Kelsey," she said in that elongated tone people use when you should have remembered something. "I rang you up at Serendipity."

I nodded. That's where I saw her. She was the clerk that rang me up last time I went to the convenience store. I had forgotten she went to school with me. She's a senior.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked me politely.

"I forgot my clothes," I lied, not wanting to whine about being ill. That's when I noticed she was in gym shorts and a plain white t-shirt. "You aren't in my class, though."

She smiled. "I'm in volleyball down the hall. I came to get some water." She pointed to the drinking fountain a few feet away. Things were quiet for a moment before she started talking again.

“You’re a big topic today,” she said.

My heart nearly stopped right there. The last thing I wanted was to begin the relentless teasing by the only girl who talks to me at this school except for... I drew another blank.

“No one really knows what happened though. It’s all speculation.”

This confused me, and my expression didn’t hide it.

“The ambulance that showed up in front of your house on Christmas,” she explained.

I nodded. That makes a lot of sense. I’d forgotten about that. Our community is pretty close-knit, and if even one other kid saw that ambulance the whole school would know by the time Winter Break was over. I sighed from relief.

“So what happened?” she asked me directly.

“That’s not really anyone’s business,” I said quiet and assertively.

“Well, right now everyone thinks you tried to kill yourself,” she admitted honestly. “You are very quiet at school, so I’ve heard, and you don’t have many friends. It’s just what people are saying.”

I looked at the ground and felt like crying again. I didn’t mind much that Kelsey had told me; actually, I was very glad she did. At least someone had the right mind to tell me the truth. But it deeply upset me how much people have judged me all this time. I hadn’t realized I seemed suicidal.

It was a while before she spoke. “I’m just curious if you tried it, is all.”

I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t trying to kill myself.”

She smiled and gave me a hug, and I felt every cell of hers against mine. I felt serene for as long as she held me, which was only a few seconds. I’d never gotten a hug from anyone but my mother and... another wall. I can’t remember her name.

“I have to get back to class,” she said with a groan. “But here.” She took a green marker out of her pocket and wrote her phone number on my hand.

“Call me,” she said from halfway down the hall.

Chapter Fifteen

Now that I knew what the hell was going on, it was easy to counter everyone's glares. Instead of looking ashamed and miserable, I smiled. It was trivial, and my smile wasn't genuine, but it confused people enough to the point that, by the end of the day, no one seemed certain I was out to end my life. The glares died down by sixth hour, but no one approached me like Kelsey. I started to realize just how lonely my life was.

I just about dashed home after I got off the bus. I went right into my room, slid my jeans down, and kicked the pull-up off. Then I dressed in my most attractive underwear to compensate and went to watch TV.

It was about a run through and a half of *The Princess Bride* before my mother called me upstairs for dinner. She asked how school was and how I was feeling. I was honest about how the kids looked at me strange for the ambulance pulling up, but I told her my day was good nonetheless. I didn't feel I was lying because I made a friend.

It was a school night and I had homework, so I wrote Kelsey's number on a piece of paper in my room before doing my work and going to bed.

The next morning was very lethargic, but better than the day before. I tried to sing in the shower like I used to, but all the notes were flat. I finally gave up and went about getting ready. After drying off, I brushed my teeth and did my hair and makeup. I tried to motivate myself to look my best, but it all ended in a half-hearted effort.

For breakfast, my mom made eggs and pancakes. I adore pancakes, but they lacked the usual appeal. I had a small glass of apple juice with the medication my mom had been giving me at breakfast for the past week. Then I went off to school.

This day was much less the same as the previous, except my emotions were diluted and I attended gym class. I went for water at the drinking fountain multiple times to see if I would run into Kelsey. I never did though.

By the time I got home, the depression started to seep in again. I was beginning to see situations differently and *The Princess Bride* had a new, dark essence I never noticed before. Finally, I convinced myself that the best way to get out of this depression was being around someone. At least that way I would feel compelled to act happy.

The buttons on my cell phone made unfamiliar chimes as I dialed Kelsey's number. I realized then that I rarely use my phone other than to call my mom.

"Hello?" Kelsey's curious voice rang through the speaker.

“Hi,” I responded with a miserable attempt at a happy tone. “This is Molly.”

“Oh, hey, what’s up?”

I contemplated that one for a second, wondering why I called. “I was wondering if you were busy.”

She spoke up quickly. “No, I’m working on homework and then I’m free. Did you have anything in mind?”

“You could come over,” I said without thinking. I’d have to tell my mom we’d have company for dinner.

“Sure,” she said with excitement. I couldn’t comprehend why such excitement. “Can you text me the directions?”

I nodded, and then realized she couldn’t see me nod. I needed to start using the phone more. “Yeah, I’ll send them in a second.”

“Alright, I’ll see you soon,” Kelsey said and hung up before I finished my goodbye.

Chapter Sixteen

I went up and notified my mom we’d have company for dinner. She looked stunned.

“You’re having a friend over?” she asked, dumbfounded.

I nodded. I suppose it was an unbelievable concept.

Then I went and straightened my room, taking extra care in hiding the pull-ups. The doorbell didn’t ring for an hour or so, however. I suppose she had more homework than she thought. Or she lived on the other side of town.

I greeted her at the door. She walked in and I introduced her to my mom, whose eyes were twinkling with the thought of me having a friend over. I rolled my eyes at her and we went into the basement. I showed Kelsey my bedroom, attempting to be a good host. She was fascinated by my Lego nightstand.

“I sort of built it,” I said with a small blush.

“That’s amazing! How long did it take?”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t keeping track.”

“Do these people have names?” she asked in regards to the six people standing near their houses and cars made from leftover parts.

I nodded. “Yeah, but I don’t know who is who.” Three of the people had exactly the same parts whereas the other three were differentiated by their hats and facial expressions.

Kelsey took the same small, green marker out of her pocket that she used to write the now faded phone number on my hand. “Well, what are they? We can mark them.”

I listed off the names for Kelsey: Ellyn, Annabelle, Ida, Neville, Roland, and nearly forgetting Yogi. She picked which ones best fit the names and put the first initial on their chest. I thanked her and, as if on cue, my mom called us up for dinner.

We ate mashed potatoes, salad, and hamburgers, although Kelsey didn’t eat the latter because she’s a vegetarian. I apologized many times for not knowing, but she said the potatoes were enough. I believed her too, because she was quite thin.

After dinner, we went back downstairs and I asked, “What is it you’d like to do now?”

She shrugged. “I have a few hours before I need to go home. What do you do in your free time?”

“I watch *The Princess Bride*,” I said shyly, since it’s not exactly a hobby.

“I’ve never seen it,” she said matter-of-factly.

I was a little stunned. “Are you serious? I’ve seen it hundreds of times! It’s my favorite movie! I always used to watch it with…”

“With who?” Kelsey asked.

I shook my head. “I can’t remember her name. She used to be my best friend, but since I got back from Winter Break she hasn’t been at school.”

I could tell by Kelsey’s expression she found this strange, but I was growing upset so she dropped the subject. “Well, I’ll be her substitute for now.”

I nodded with a smile and we turned on the DVD player.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning was tragic. Despite the fun night I had with Kelsey, my lethargic mental state was back and growing worse. I didn't want to get out of bed; my mom had to drag me out of my room and push me into the bathroom. By the time I had brushed my teeth and showered, I was already late for school and my mom was growing impatient.

I slid open my top drawer and picked out a random pair of underwear, too inattentive to be troubled by miniscule decisions, but doubled back to my dresser. Sifting through the pairs of cotton briefs, I fetched the small off-pink package from the back of the drawer.

"This is ridiculous," I spoke aloud, probably in a vain attempt to convince myself not to do it. But my mind had been made up.

I slid one of the pull-ups from the package and put the rest back in their hiding spot beneath all the underwear I was irrationally passing up the opportunity to wear. Then, just like the first time, I slid the training pants up my legs and let them rest snugly around my hips. I breathed a soft sigh and smiled to myself, knowing my cheeks were a shade redder for this decision.

Like before, the rest happened rather quickly. My jeans slid up my legs next, then my bra hooked in place and a shirt over my head. I took my pill with a Poptart and a juice box, my mom in a hurry to drive me to school after having missed my bus. I chose to sit in the back, which was out of character, but I really wanted to fiddle with the waistband of the pull-up. I was fascinated by the absurd fondness I had toward it.

I arrived near the end of first hour, deciding it would be easier just to skip first hour entirely. I hated all those eyes that follow you to your seat when you walk in late to a class. Instead I went to the vending machine, bought a water bottle, and headed to my locker. I sat on the floor sipping my beverage and counting the minutes on the clock. The situation of things made me think of Kelsey, and how I'd been in a pull-up that time too.

The bell finally rang, doors opened, students poured into the halls, and I stood up, tugging down the shirt and feeling sincerely nervous for the first time since this morning. I forgot how many children attend a public school, how impolite they are, and all the possible ways my shirt might hover too high and my pants drop too low to expose my undergarment. It's happened on many occasions with my panties. In response, I shied against the lockers and tried to keep out of crowds as much as possible.

Mr. Brusly's biology class wasn't far away, so I grabbed my backpack and walked down the hall and into the room, sighing from relief, and taking my seat. It wasn't long until class began.

Chapter Eighteen

I never was fully aware what was going on in Mr. Brusly's biology class, and today was no exception. I hardly ever took notes or paid attention, and this time I distracted myself with mild daydreams of the pull-up snugly secured around my hips. I felt like I was losing my mind.

I began doodling little stars onto the inside jacket of my biology binder, engrossed in my daydreams and hardly giving any attention to my movements. I was distracted by the bliss of my fantasies, so I hadn't noticed before how badly I had to use the bathroom. I cursed silently my purchase of the water bottle.

Lifting my head from its rested position on my palm, I began to raise my hand to ask permission to leave the room, but instead I lowered it back onto the desktop and went back to drawing the little stars. Each star became less and less symmetrical as the pain increased and I began to wiggle in my seat. The proper thing to do was to simply ask to be excused from class, but I wouldn't put my hand back into the air.

"Are you alright?" Déjà vu. Nonetheless, I smiled up at Mr. Brusly and nodded.

"In need of another bathroom break, Miss Cross?" he continued.

I attempted a nod, but my head shook side to side and out of my mouth came a polite and sincere "I'm fine". Mr. Brusly nodded and continued the lecture.

After a quick internal monologue of scolding, I tried to focus on my next move. I still had half an hour until the end of class and I surely couldn't ask for a bathroom pass now; I'd seem ridiculous. People think I'm crazy enough as it is.

Mr. Brusly continued to look in my direction, but I blocked him out, as well as the rest of the class, and began to scribble unorganized shapes next to my little stars. My breathing continued evenly and my muscles were relaxed. I thought I wouldn't be able to hold it, but it seems my fantasies tend to exaggerate.

When class concluded, I stepped out and headed directly to the bathroom. The room was empty, so I selected the larger handicapped stall at the end of the row and locked the door behind me.

I stood with my arms crossed, swaying lightly on each foot as I sighed and scolded myself silently. I needed to use the bathroom, and yet I wouldn't will myself to move. I considered just letting myself go into the pull-up, which curiously appealed to me, but I quickly brushed the thought from my head.

After a bit too much time spent contemplating, I picked up my book bag and left the bathroom, sulking and shuffling my feet. I took my seat in third hour and went to working on the geometry problems on the board. But I was dreadfully uncomfortable, and all my triangles came out crooked.

I wiggled in my seat for the entire hour, refusing to leave for the restroom although we were allowed at any time. I intently worked on the math problems all hour and only completed half of what I often get done.

When the bell rang, I was the first to the door, heading to the bathroom and closing the handicapped stall again. It was lunch time, which meant the bathroom would be crowded soon. I whined and stared at the toilet, full of disinterest and distain. My feelings were irrational, but so direly potent I couldn't bring myself to slip my jeans off.

I shifted my weight from foot to foot until I heard voices on the outside of the stall. Then I took a seat on the toilet with my jeans around my waist in case anyone happened to see my feet dancing beneath the stall door.

I closed my eyes and attempted to drown out the sounds of conversation and running faucets and the pitter patter of soft flats on the bathroom tile. And before long I was sitting alone in the bathroom stall without another sound around me or a sight between my eyelids and retinas. I was blissful and comfortable. And when I opened my eyes, the light was hard, the sound was dull, and my pull up was wet.

Chapter Nineteen

To my surprise and concern, the sensation of a damp pull-up against my skin was not entirely unpleasant. On the contrary, I rather enjoyed the wetness and warmth against my body. I tried not to read into it, but every step I took made my cheeks a darker shade of pink, to the point that when I arrived at gym class Ms. Callahan asked me if I was feeling alright. Since I obviously couldn't change in front of the girls, I lied and said I felt ill, and received my second zero that week.

My anxiety began to climb as the hour passed. My pull-up had started to lose its warmth and, in turn, I was beginning to see my situation as ill-planned. By the end of class, I was already shifting uncomfortably on the tile floor.

I stepped into the crowd of girls fleeing from the locker room and tried to blend in. My anxiety was at its peak now, and I waited for someone to notice and yell, “Molly is wearing a diaper!”

For the duration on the day I was on guard, prepared for the gawking and pointing and laughing and snickering to start. I waited for the boys to chant and the girls to giggle and the text messages to begin. But when the sixth hour bell rang and I had boarded my bus home and no one was paying more attention to me than usual, I sulked into the seat and began to relax.

The fabric of the damp pull-up began to itch before I arrived at my bus stop. I had to use the bathroom again, but decided on waiting. I wanted the cold, itchy feeling to be washed away, but the pull-up was intended for children; I had no confidence in it holding another wetting.

I walked quickly home and through the front door, down the stairs, and to the bathroom. I slipped my jeans off and kicked them across the tile floor, reaching for the toilet seat, and stopping.

“Sit, Molly,” I ordered myself as sternly as I could, and realizing how crazy I must look: a sixteen year old girl in a damp pull-up talking herself into using a toilet.

I took a step back and sighed, returning to my external monologue. “And I suppose I’m just going to wet it again? I know it’ll leak. Then I’ll have a mess to clean. Why not just use the toilet?” What was anxiety, now with the security of my own home, turned to anger. “This is ridiculous!”

I stormed out of the bathroom and ran toward my room, lying on the bed and covering my head and ears with a pillow. I tried, like last time, to drown out all the light and sound, but stood up before I let myself have another accident.

Grabbing a towel from the hallway closet, I went into the bathroom and set it on the floor, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror and turning five shades of red. I looked absurd in the slightly-too-small child’s pull-up, and tried to convince myself not to do this.

Ignoring my own internal pleas, I placed both feet on the sides of the towel, leaned backward against the wall, and closed my eyes. The light flickered away as my eyelids closed and the quiet creaking of the house slowly dribbled into to nothing. And this time I concentrated on my body and felt the warmth gather in the already-damp pull-up as I began to wet it. And it wasn’t many seconds afterward that I felt that same warm wetness on my thighs and dripping down my legs. I opened my eyes, blissfully absent, and gave a long sigh.

“Well,” I told myself solemnly, “at least I know now to refrain from using one pull-up twice.”

After throwing the towel into the washing machine, I returned to my room and stripped off the pull-up revealing tinted pink skin. I poked it lightly, pulling back my finger from the initial burn.

“It seems I need to invest in baby powder,” I said quietly to myself, already foreseeing another day in pull-ups.

I went into the bathroom and took a handful of toilet paper, wet it under the bathroom faucet, and started wiping down my skin slowly. “Some baby wipes would be nice too,” I said, making a mental note.

When I had finally given up on becoming entirely clean, and fearing the warm water of a shower on my tender skin, I went back to my room and dressed in the softest panties I could find, slipping my jeans back on over them.

I plopped down on my bed, smiling softly to myself, and daydreaming about my day and all the days to come, ignoring the stinging of my rear on the mattress. I yawned and rolled onto my side, drifting in and out of awareness for a few minutes until finally dozing off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty

I woke up to the sound of the door slamming upstairs. My mom must have just gotten home; that meant I slept a few hours. I shuffled around on my comforter, remembered the rash I had on my butt by the unfamiliar pain, and rolled onto my side. I needed ointment of sorts, and I started to ponder how exactly to go about getting it.

“I’ll run out of pull-ups eventually, and I need baby wipes and baby powder and rash cream. If I fake bedwetting, my mom would buy me the pull-ups, and since she read the book of my daydreams, it wouldn’t be that out of the ordinary and I doubt she’d ask many questions. Of course, she’d get baby powder and baby wipes as standard, but I’d probably need to buy the rash cream on my own.

“Then again, I don’t want to start any additional drama with my mom if I don’t have to. Last time we had talked about my daydreams it ended badly. I feel calm, but I can’t be certain I won’t go off on her again.”

I let out a deep sigh and stated what I knew from the beginning: “I’ll have to go and get it all myself.”

I stayed on my bed, comfortably avoiding the pain by keeping on my side, for quite some time. My mom had probably begun cooking dinner. I didn't want to bother her, and I was still working out all the little kinks in my head. There were a lot of things that could go wrong with a girl my age buying pull-ups. I had managed to avoid Murphy's Law and maintain confidentiality, but how long could that possibly last?

My eyes wandered around my bedroom and I began to feel it looked too grown-up for my taste, although I never had a problem with it before. The colors were rather dreary, and I thought of buying another lamp. The only thing that seemed very 'in place' was the self-erected Lego nightstand.

I let myself waste time staring at the little people with their little green letters on their chests that Kelsey had written in marker. I smiled calmly and made up little plays in my head using them as characters, the three look-a-likes being triplets and Ellyn enacting a sixteen year old girl with a diaper fixation. I laughed lightly to myself.

But something seemed off, and it started to nag me until my daydreams stopped and my smile faded from my face. I shuffled closer to the little Lego people and picked them up in my hands and placed them on the bed. And after a minute or two of rearranging them, just when my mom called me upstairs for dinner, 'RAINEY' stared back at me in green letters.

I slipped on my jacket, then my shoes, and ran up the stairs, past my mom, and out the door, shouting behind me, "I'll be home soon!"

I ran halfway to Serendipity, smiley and energetic and warm despite the cold January snow. I finally slowed down and talked aloud to myself between gasps.

"She, Rainey I mean, wouldn't be such a coward. She'd just go in there and get what she wants." I hit my palm to my forehead. "Of course, confidence is the best cover up. Everyone would suspect a girl who intends to wear the pull-ups she buys to be shy. If I act like Rainey, no one will second guess."

By the time I bounced into Serendipity, the sun was beginning to set and the cold was catching up to me. I took long strides to the baby aisle, not second guessing my movements or gestures. I wanted to look as confident as possible.

First the L/XL girl printed Goodnites went under my arm, and then a large bottle of baby powder and some wipes. I reached for a pacifier, but thought it was unwise considering it looked like I was shopping for an older child. Then I made my way to the ointments and picked up some diaper cream. I was embarrassed that it had such a childish name, but I wasn't exactly sure which rash cream would work best; there are plenty of rashes, where I know exactly what diaper cream is for.

I was still feeling peppy and confident by the time I got to the register, and all that vanished as I set my purchases down in front of Kelsey. She smiled her bubbly smile at me and proceeded to ring up my purchases.

“More for your cousin?” she asked as she held up the Goodnites. I just stared at her, dumbfounded and embarrassed, my cheeks starting to darken.

She looked at me awkwardly. “Hey, Molly, are you alright?” I nodded to indicate not to worry, although I felt the furthest thing from ‘alright’.

“Did your friend show up at school today?” she asked me casually, as if I hadn’t basically just given away the pull-ups were for me by the color of my cheeks.

I shook my head and tried to focus on acting confident. “No, but I remembered her name: Rainey. Her name is Rainey.”

Kelsey stopped scanning things at that point, much to my dismay considering she only had the wipes to go, and stared at me hard. I tried to avoid eye contact, but her concern was piercing.

“What is it?” I asked her weakly.

“Do you remember how I mistook you for someone when we first met?” she asked me seriously.

I nodded.

“I think her name was Rainey,” she said slowly.

I looked at her for a minute, hopelessly and irrevocably confused. “Rainey doesn’t really look like me,” I said quietly. “We don’t even dress the same.”

She was quiet for a minute, but kept her eyes on me. I was beginning to feel sick.

“Molly,” she began softly, “come with me, please?” She stepped out from behind the counter and took my hand gently.

My immediate reaction was to scream at her, but I refrained. I didn’t want a repeat of what happened with my mom, especially in public. Instead, I let her take my hand and lead me toward the ‘employee’s only’ section of the store.

I opened my mouth to talk, but words failed me. I felt dizzy and closed my eyes.

“Molly,” she talked quietly. “Darling, are you sure you’re okay? You look flushed.”

“Rainey,” I whispered. “I want to talk to Rainey.”

I heard Kelsey sigh as she helped me sit down in an uncomfortable chair that stung my sore bottom. However, I hardly noticed. Tears began falling down my cheeks.

“Molly, please don’t cry,” she said sympathetically. “It will all be okay.”

“I want Rainey,” I continued to blabber.

“Sweetie, I don’t know much about your life, but I’m willing to stick by you and figure all this out.”

She held me and I sobbed harder.

“I need you to do me a favor though,” she whispered in my ear.

I nodded.

“I need you to tell me what happened on Christmas.”

Chapter Twenty-One

I took Thursday and Friday off school. I was sullen and my mother took work off to keep my spirits up, which were unsuccessful. Kelsey would stop by every day when school let out, but it wasn’t until Saturday afternoon that I started talking again.

“I don’t want to take my medication anymore,” I said to her. She smiled, more likely from hearing my voice again than what I’d actually said.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I miss Rainey!” I blurted without thinking.

“Remember what we talked about?” she said with hesitation. She feared I’d relapse. We’d only known each other for a few days and she was already so involved. I felt sick for having done this to her.

I shut up again, which wasn’t the response Kelsey was looking for, so she began to talk.

“I know this is hard on you, but please understand the situation. You say this girl was over all the time and your mom doesn’t know who she is. And no one at school knows-” She stopped when she saw my expression. “I asked around.”

I sulked further into my depression, closing my eyes tight to keep all the water inside them.

“What we need to do is focus on getting you happy,” she said in an upbeat tone. But when her words got to me, they fell as flat as paper. Her optimism had no effect on me.

“There’s a thing going on tomorrow,” she continued hesitantly. “It’s not really a party, but I’m getting together with some people and I wanted you to come. We sort of do it every Sunday.”

I shook my head side to side.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she chirped. “I’ll be over tomorrow afternoon to help you pick out clothes.”

I detested her excitement. All I wanted to do was stay home and sit perfectly still until I oxidized and fell apart. And that’s what I tried to do for the next twenty-one hours. But it didn’t happen, and when my doorbell rang Sunday morning I wished for the wind to break me up and blow me away.

“Rise and shine, sleepy head,” Kelsey said, pulling back my comforter, although we both knew I hadn’t slept.

“You didn’t even shower?” she whined. “I’m not going to take care of you like a two year old.” My cheeks burned, but my head was still in the pillow so she couldn’t tell.

“I don’t want to go,” I said, speaking directly to my bed.

“Yes you do,” she countered, grabbing my wrist and lifting me out of the bed, a feat not too difficult for a girl two years older and four inches taller.

I sulked off toward the bathroom, not wanting to make a scene. I would end up in there anyway, whether it be by Kelsey throwing me in there herself or my mom’s morose tone instructing me out of bed.

Under the water, I waited and waited to rust. I knew it would happen eventually, but Kelsey’s voice from outside the bathroom door kept slowing the process, until finally I gave up and came out. My frown remained plastered on my face several inches below my empty eyes.

“Get dressed,” she said. But I walked past her and went back into my bed, towel and all.

“Really?” her voice rose as well as her arms. Then she grabbed me and tugged until I fell onto the floor. I looked up at her through the haze that was my life. Her hair looked grey, and the world was mostly black and white.

“I’ll pick out clothes for you,” she said with a long sigh. “But it’s hard for me to help you won’t help yourself.”

I didn’t move or blink or talk. I didn’t even hear what she said for another thirty seconds. My world had a natural lag.

She went to my dresser, starting at the top. Then I blinked and sat up. She closed the drawer and went to the second one, grabbing a pair of jeans and turning toward me. I was blushing red, and I suddenly felt proud of having added color to the dreary bedroom.

“You saw?” I said. She only smiled and ignored the question. She didn’t want to upset me. So I told a lie. “It’s okay if you saw.”

“I never suspected they were for you,” she shrugged, referring to the pull-ups in the top drawer of my dresser.

I fell silent again, and she frowned. Like my mother equated eating to feeling better, Kelsey was the same with talking. So she kept the unwilling conversation going, although I could tell by her expression that she knew it wasn’t her business.

“A lot of people wet the bed at this age, with stress and all. I’m going into psychology, so I know this sort of stuff. You shouldn’t be ashamed.” She tossed me the pants and went back to my dresser.

“I don’t wet the bed,” I said slowly, trying to turn the color back on to better gauge her reaction. But she didn’t turn around until she found a nice shirt for me, and even then she only smiled and said: “You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

I wasn’t eager to meet new people, but Kelsey didn’t seem to care. As she phrased it, “I’m better off with too many friends than too little.” But the only friend I cared about having was Rainey.

Kelsey drove, which was strange. I'd never been driven by anyone but an adult before, and I kept thinking we would crash. Oddly enough the idea appealed to me, but I quickly brushed it from my consciousness. I knew better than to think like that. It would only make things worse. More so, Kelsey turned out to be a fantastic driver. She even knew which grey was the stoplight and which grey meant to go.

She pulled into the driveway of a large house, wooden and unkept. The sidewalks were shoveled only by a constant stamp of feet walking in opposite directions, and a more snow covered walkway that led to the rickety porch. And upon seeing the shambled residence, I found a sense of belonging. The house and I were both broken.

We walked onto the porch, stairs and floorboards creaking as we went. And on the front door, glued over top chipped lime green paint, was a collection of pennies spelling out the word "Arty". But I didn't get to inspect it because Kelsey opened the door before knocking.

"Hey," she called into the foyer, "anyone here?"

The house was magnificent. What was a shack on the outside turned out to be a portal into creativity, and all the color flooded back. The foyer looked like someone glued all the pages of an iSpy book to the walls and each object pulled off paper and into reality. On the floor, a brightly decorated splatter paint carpet, two feet by four, read the word "UP" in dark black letters. So I looked up, and on the ceiling were at least fifty words, all written in a different color, of numbers and objects. My mouth dropped open as I read "chalk" and began searching the walls for it.

"In the kitchen," a man's voice called. Kelsey stepped forward and I followed a few feet behind her, browsing the walls as we passed through the living room. This one was all paint and fabric: an elegant night scene. I took it upon myself to look up first, seeing a full moon in a tinted white, neatly detailed and shining down on me, only a quarter covered by clouds made of two layers of mesh, giving it the see-through affect into the starry sky that fell halfway down the walls.

The room was dimly lit with only two lamps, both taller than me and topped with a black orb; tiny holes were poked into the fabric so specs of light could shine through. Each wall had a different season: the swirling of autumn leaves made with crinkled tissue paper, the fireflies in summer flashing with yellow Christmas lights, the flowers of spring protruding from the wall with colored origami counterparts, and the snow of winter reflected by hundreds of miniaturized three dimensional sculpted snowflakes. The dark blue carpet had no design, giving me the sensation of standing in the middle of a lake. Couches lined the right wall, a television on my left, but all the colors of these things were ignored in the darkness.

But our time in the seasonal room was short lived as we entered the kitchen, and the contrast hurt my eyes. The whole place was painted a soft shade of yellow and on each cabinet

was painted the face of a different emotion, from happy to sad to angry to worried. And I counted eighteen before noticing the rest of the kitchen. The tiled floor was a checkerboard, black and red, which looked oddly disruptive against the yellow top half of the room. All the furniture, either the table or bar stools or chairs or trash can or lamps, was painted to match the floor. The red furniture rested on red disks two feet in diameter, and the black furniture on equally sized black disks that fit perfectly into the colored tiles like an oversized game of checkers.

Two men in black chairs sat at a red table, ironically playing chess. They both got up simultaneously upon noticing our entrance and came over to hug Kelsey. I didn't expect it, but I was next. I hugged them back, but said not a word.

"This is Marty, the sculptor," Kelsey said, motioning to the body who hugged me first. He was tall, had short black hair, and a very attractive face. He wore blue dress pants and matching socks, but his torso was more complicated. He seemed very muscular, but it was hard to tell with a white polo on, then a blue button up shirt partially buttoned, then a purple button up shirt unbuttoned, and finally a liquid black vest. I nodded but said nothing.

"And this is Arty, the painter," Kelsey motioned to the second boy. He looked very dissimilar to Marty, despite their rhyming names: he was only an inch or two taller than me and had shaggy side swept brown hair. He was wearing paint stained jeans and a button up shirt buttoned up incorrectly. And to him I smiled but said nothing.

"And boys, this is Molly," Kelsey then motioned to me. And Marty nodded as I had. And Arty bowed. I thought to curtsy for the humor, but my brain was still disconnected and I refrained.

"You like the house, Molly?" Arty asked. He seemed very outgoing. But I only nodded.

"That's probably the most unenthusiastic response we've ever gotten," Arty continued, talking to Marty now.

"She's had a rough week," Kelsey said, putting her arm around me. I let out a light sigh and nodded.

"I apologize," I said. "It really is a lovely home."

"Lovely?" the boys said simultaneously and looked at each other.

They both laughed, then Kelsey laughed, and I laughed too. And one laugh made me feel much better.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“So you aren’t related?” I asked quizzically.

“No,” Arty answered. “The name thing is a coincidence. We just live together and stuff, with Ally and Alys.”

I looked puzzled.

“If Arty is the painter and Marty is the sculptor,” Kelsey explained, “then the twins would be the planners.”

“We’re very unorganized,” Arty shrugged. “This house wouldn’t look this way if it weren’t for them.”

“And where are they?”

“Already at the party, probably,” said Kelsey, and Marty nodded.

“So the party’s not here?” I asked.

Everyone shook their head.

“I like it here,” I said quietly, looking up at the moon even though it was only five in the evening. Arty and Marty smiled at the compliment.

“And you?” I looked at Kelsey. She looked a little confused.

“Oh, I don’t live here,” she finally said, putting up her hands. “These are just my friends and this is where we hang out.”

I nodded in understanding.

“So let’s get going!” Arty said, already on his feet. Marty stood up from the couch, then Kelsey and I followed suit.

We all drove in Kelsey’s car, and I got shotgun. I didn’t call it, but the boys automatically took the back. They talked most of the way, but I was more interested in where we were going. We’d left town already, and I never went out this far.

“Don’t worry about the twins,” Kelsey said as we pulled into a parking lot. A large sign read “HEATER” on the building in front of us.

“I should be worried?”

“Not yet,” Arty spoke from behind me, annoyance ringing in his voice. “But they’re a pain to tell apart, with their little games.”

Now I was worried.

Heater was apparently a theater, but the T burnt out a long time ago. So I was told, the old owner sold the place real cheap to a couple of college kids a few years back, but due to some technical error the projections are still shipped to the building. So now every Sunday at seven, the new owners play one of the films with no cost attendance, and afterward people put on their own skits on stage.

It wasn’t until after the movie though that I met Ally and Alys, and then my worries multiplied tenfold. They were exact clones of each other, both petite and adorable.

“I’m Ally,” said the first.

“I’m Alys,” said the second.

Both did a simultaneous wave and I gulped.

“Molly,” I said in return.

“Nice to meet you,” said Ally.

“And I hope you enjoy the rest of the night,” said Alys.

And with that they walked away and I looked at Kelsey awestricken. But she only stifled a laugh and head off to get snacks, leaving me with the boys.

“So you’re a sophomore?” Arty said.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Kelsey told us about you.” I frowned. I hated being talked about. “I’m a junior: same school.”

“And you?” I said to Marty. He watched as three performers left the stage.

“He graduated last year,” Arty replied.

“And the twins?” I inquired, not knowing what else to talk about.

“They’re your age.”

I blushed. It’s true they were a few inches shorter than me and really didn’t look all that old, but they had an aura of maturity and self confidence that I certainly lacked. Then again, I had things wrong with me and they likely didn’t.

“So less about us,” Arty said. “What do you like to do?”

“I used to write,” I said slowly, frowning. “I haven’t done it in a while.”

“What do you do now?”

“Go to school.”

“I mean for fun!” Arty laughed.

I shrugged.

He seemed a little aggravated, so he stood up and grabbed my wrist.

“Hey!” I shouted, but he dragged me down the concrete steps to the stage, climbing up on it and pulling me up next.

“Good evening everyone!” he shouted to the crowd. “This is Molly!” I was mortified.

The crowd echoed “Hi Molly”.

“We’re going to do some improv!”

“Oh, no we’re not,” I hissed.

“Why don’t you ever do anything I like doing?!” he screamed, sadness all over his face. I was taken aback.

“I just met you today!” I shouted back.

“Don’t you believe in love at first sight?!”

My cheeks took a new shade of red undiscovered by modern science.

“Please, give me a chance,” Arty continued.

“I... It’s too fast. And I’ve never kissed anyone before...”

He glided toward me, taking me in his arms. “We can remedy that.”

I pushed him away, turning so my back was to him. “Don’t you see... we can’t be together.”

He gasped. “Is it because I’m so attractive?!”

“No,” I sighed, turning to him. “It’s because of those pants! I made a vow never to date anyone without clean pants...”

The crowd erupted in laughter and I tried not to smile.

Arty stared down at the pair of paint coated jeans and frowned. “Then, for you...”

“What is it?” I begged.

“I... I will...”

“Spit it out!” I screamed.

“I will go buy new pants!”

“Oh, Arty!” I leapt into his arms and hugged him tight. He hugged me back and the crowd applauded. He took his bow and I did the curtsy I’d passed up before.

We both took our seats and the next group took the stage.

“Now what do you do?” he asked.

“I act,” I smiled back at him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I can’t believe I missed it!” Kelsey shouted. Arty snickered in the back seat.

“Thanks for the ride,” Marty said, climbing out of the car as it stopped a few paces from the driveway.

“See you soon, Molly,” Arty said before closing his car door.

“I can’t believe you went on stage.”

“It wasn’t like I had a choice,” I said with a blush.

“So you had fun?” Kelsey smiled.

I nodded nervously.

“What’s on your mind, kiddo?” she asked, taking a peak at me before turning back to the traffic.

“I want to tell you the things I told Rainey,” I began.

Kelsey kept quiet and waited.

“I told you about Christmas and that journal I had, but I never told you what it was about. And I think that if I have someone to talk to about things, I’ll get better. I mean, if it’s true that Rainey wasn’t real, I must have made her for a reason. I think it’s because I moved and I had no friends.”

There was a very long silence before Kelsey spoke.

“I’m your friend.”

I smiled. “I know. And if I don’t tell you the things that bother me, I’m not utilizing our friendship very well. Then I’ll miss Rainey again. But tonight I didn’t miss her. I was happy and in the moment.”

“Well, you can tell me anything,” Kelsey encouraged.

“I used to have these daydreams before the medication and I’d always write them in that book. And I’d dream about being treated like a little girl again. I’m not saying I was a little girl or anything; I was still sixteen.” I took a deep sigh.

“Take your time,” Kelsey said, turning down a different street than we came. She was buying me time.

“It’s hard to explain. But since Christmas, when I got home and Rainey disappeared, all those daydreams went away. Now all the emotions I felt in my daydreams are active all the time, and a lot of them don’t make sense. Like, I shouldn’t want to feel like a little girl, but I do.”

“And the pull-ups, for example, are a mechanism that makes you feel like a little girl?” she inquired, trying to make sense of my ramblings.

“Yeah,” I blushed.

“So how does it make you feel to do things like wear pull-ups?” I was astonished at her politeness toward the awkward subject.

“Ridiculous,” I sighed.

“And how did it make you feel in the daydreams?”

I had to think about that. It was about a month since the last daydream, but I remembered everything I wrote down in that little black book. Everything seemed simple and enjoyable and fantastic.

“Happy,” I said after a moment.

“Why is it any different now?” she asked me, pulling into my driveway.

“Because I know it’s wrong in the real world.”

“As long as you don’t hurt anyone, nothing that makes you happy is wrong.”

I nodded very slowly, not sure what to say. We both sat there for a long while until she finally leaned over and hugged me. It was awkward to hug while sitting in the car, but I enjoyed it anyway.

“Thank you for taking me out,” I said quietly. “And thank you for letting me talk.”

“Thank you for finally talking.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“So I have a question,” Kelsey said to me as I walked into the locker room.

“Can it wait until I’m changed?” I asked. Usually I don’t participate much in Gym class, but today everyone had to do laps. I was exhausted.

“You can change over here if you want,” she pointed a thumb behind her. It was customary that upperclassmen had the lockers near the front and the lower-classmen, like me, had to walk all the way to the back.

“It’s okay,” I sighed. “I’ll talk to you in a minute.” Walking past her, I made my way to my locker and got out of the sweat-drenched clothes. I wanted to take a shower, but I wouldn’t have time to get to class. Instead, I pushed my bangs back with an Alice band and applied extra deodorant.

“So exactly how many things make you feel like a little girl?” she asked directly as we stepped into the hall. I looked at her in disbelief. “What?”

“We couldn’t talk about this later?” I whispered. “I don’t want the whole school knowing.” But no one was around. We were the last two out of the locker room.

She pouted. Obviously she had a train of thought.

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “I’ve only got one thing. There was other stuff in the journal, but nothing I’ve tried.”

“So buy some stuff,” Kelsey said to me with a shrug.

“I don’t have the money,” I sighed, having already considered her suggestion.

She stopped walking, so I did too. We were at my classroom, and I began to wonder if she went out of her way to walk with me.

“You walked me to class,” I said quietly. “Why?”

“Friends do that.” She looked puzzled. “You need to get out more.”

I nodded.

“I was wondering if you wanted a ride home,” she smiled at me. Every time Kelsey mentioned her car, I was always caught off guard. It was strange having a friend that could drive.

“Sure,” I smiled. “Thank you.”

“Meet me at the student lot after school,” she said as the warning bell rang, then she turned and walked down the hall.

The week continued without event, mostly like that with Kelsey driving me home every day. Then on Friday she didn't ask me if I wanted a ride and just said "see you after school", so I met her at the student lot anyway. Sure enough, she was waiting.

"There's going to be a little detour," Kelsey said as I tossed my backpack into the back seat.

"What kind of detour?" I asked.

"On weekdays, after I drop you off, I go right to work," Kelsey explained to me. "But today, we're going to work first."

I shrugged. Serendipity was right around the corner from my house, so if Kelsey had to stay and start her shift I could easily walk home. The sun was out and a walk seemed really nice. I decided that I'd walk home anyway, regardless if Kelsey offered me a ride.

We got to the convenience store ten minutes before my bus would have dropped me off at the stop. It's really miraculous how school busses seem so much slower than cars. My mom used to get home from school before me, but this past week Kelsey has gotten me there first. Yesterday, I'd even gotten a house key; it felt like a milestone, like my first steps or something.

Serendipity was completely empty and the whole store was silent. There wasn't the usual muttering into cell phone receivers or pitter patter of shoes on the tile. The only thing I heard was a soft inaudible hum of the heater and Linda calling us over.

"It's good to see you again," she smiled at me. She wore a red vest over the standard blue shirt: a symbol of authority. "You haven't been in lately."

"I've been busy," I said. "I heard you got promoted."

"I sure did," she nodded at me, motioning with her hands to the vest. "That's the reason I can do things like this."

"Like this?" I asked as my forehead creased. Confusion was evident on my face.

"You didn't tell her?" Linda looked at Kelsey, and then I turned too. She was smiling.

"What do you think about working here?" Kelsey asked. "You could use the money, and I think more time out of the house would do you good."

I hugged her. It was the first time I recall ever taking the initiative to hug anyone but Rainey since I'd moved to this city. I felt foolish after doing it, but she hugged me back.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“You care about me,” I said into her shoulder, like it was an epiphany.

She laughed.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Linda said. “Now you both go get your uniforms on.”

We stepped behind the counter and into the back room. I opened my phone and dialed my mom’s cell to tell her I’d be home late tonight.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“We can close,” Kelsey said to Linda as she turned off the luminescent sign.

“Alright, but make sure to lock the back door,” Linda remarked, grabbing her purse. “And don’t take long.”

Then Kelsey and I were alone. I put the broom I was using back in the closet and went to the register, watching Kelsey record the lottery ticket sales.

“Will I get to run the register?” I asked as she counted.

“You’re not old enough,” she said as she scrawled a number on the pad of paper.

“That’s lame.” I fiddled with a pen on the counter and waited for her to finish. Finally, she turned around, went to her purse, and pulled out her wallet.

“Consider this an advance,” she smiled and handed me a stack of bills. “You worked eight hours today, so you’ll be able to pay me back when you get your first check.”

I counted the money: forty dollars. “But why are you giving me this?”

“So you can buy one of the things from your journal, and hurry so I can close the register.”

“I can do it later,” I argued, but Kelsey shot me a glare.

“No one is here and you have money. This is the perfect time. If you’re worried about what I think, I’ll try to ring you up with my eyes closed. But we aren’t leaving here till you buy something.”

While I half wondered why Kelsey was so intent on making me do this, I headed through the aisle of shampoo toward the back of the store. The front of the baby aisle was dedicated to diapers. I let my eyes glaze over the packaging, curious and tempted, but I wasn't about to purchase a pack of diapers in front of Kelsey. She already knew about the pull-ups; that was embarrassing enough. Anyway, diapers weren't in my journal. This interest was new.

I reached the essentials next, things like baby food and formula, then the bottles, pacifiers, teething rings, and baby toys. I knew what it was I wanted most, but my nervousness was getting the best of me.

"She's not going to let me leave until I buy something," I sighed, wondering if talking to myself was crazy. I looked around. "It's better than talking to imaginary people."

I bent down and fiddled through the pacifiers, looking for the pink one with butterflies. Unfortunately, it wasn't on the shelves. Instead, I settled for a purple one with a flower in the middle, and went to the counter.

"Was that so bad?" Kelsey smiled as she rang up the pacifier, ignoring the item entirely. "That comes to three fifteen."

I handed her one of the tens she gave me, received my change, and took the pacifier off the counter. She closed the register and together we braved the falling snow and got into Kelsey's car. The drive home was short, so I had to pipe up quickly to get my question in.

"Why do you push me to invest in all this little kid stuff?"

She was silent for a while, and then we pulled into my driveway. I sighed at the short drive and reached for my door handle.

"You're like a little sister to me," Kelsey said calmly. She wasn't looking at me. "I'm an only child, and it's cool to have someone to watch over like this. And I like seeing you happy. I know you're timid about pull-ups and pacifiers, and a lot more stuff I'm sure, but some part of you likes it. And if I just sit here and let your worries run your life, I'd feel like a crappy sister. You don't seem to realize, but there's no harm in being yourself."

I gave her an awkward in-the-car hug and stepped out onto the snowy driveway, pacifier in hand. Before she pulled out of the driveway I turned and waved goodbye, then headed inside and out of the cold. It was already past ten and my mom was asleep. As for me, I was exhausted from my first day at work. I wanted nothing more than to get some rest, so I headed straight to my room.

Slipping out of my work uniform, I went to the dresser and dug around for my pajama pants and a tank top. After collecting them and tossing them to my bed, I let my fingers slide over the handle to the top drawer.

“There’s no harm,” I affirmed, opening the drawer and tossing a pull-up onto my pajama pants. I went to dressing myself in the selected clothing, then flipped off the light and climbed into bed. Lying there quietly, my eyes adjusted until I could see each green letter on the chests of the Lego civilians. Then, using my index finger, I tipped each person one by one until her name disappeared.

I slipped the pacifier between my lips and closed my eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I shook my head back and forth. I didn’t know much, but I knew it was wrong.

Sucking the cotton, I shivered at the cold. Goosebumps ran along my forearms and thighs, tickling me and trying to tell me it’s all okay just like the fingers did. I talked but my voice had never worked from the beginning.

My back absorbed the warmth of the bed sheets as my rear was lifted and the pull-up slid to my feet. Sickness overtook me as everything began to burn. Pain singed my stomach, sending tacks through my bloodstream from my toes to my fingertips. Oxygen left me, and I gave my best attempts at sucking down the thick air, heavy like syrup in my flaming lungs.

I cried. The tears stung like acid on my fragile cheeks, the tightness of the fabric around my wrists like boiling water. All sensations were unbearable, miniscule or engrossing, and each one excruciating. I trembled and I shook, pleading the Lord for my voice.

Even when it ended the pain never stopped, and I was left in tatters, in shambles. And when I was lifted from the mattress and saw the red, I remembered last week when Henry fell off the monkey bars; I wondered if he felt like this.

My head hit ceramic and I bit down on the cotton as it absorbed the red from my mouth. Sound had vacated the world and I knew nothing but the constant searing of my temples and the loud drum in my head making it all worse. I writhed in the tub as the cold spray dampened my skin and red circled the drain. I shivered again, and a rough hand enveloped my hip.

“...get the dirty girl cleaned up...” was all I made out. A man’s voice.

Then something cold slipped into my rear and I screamed. The icy feeling fled quickly as warm fluid pumped its way into my body. It wasn't long until pain shot through my torso and I began to twitch.

Turquoise hands held my wrists, and I flailed and kicked all I could. A menacing, outraged cry escaped my lips as I found my voice, the pacifier replacing the cotton and falling from my mouth. My feet hit something solid, and a loud thump echoed.

I opened my eyes and my mom sat on the floor. She gasped for air and I couldn't move. I'd hurt her. But it wasn't until after I took the time to wipe the water from my eyes that I saw the blood on my sheets.

I continued to sob, tears dripping down my cheeks in two well-hydrated streams. My mother caught her breath, stood on shaky feet, and took a seat next to me. I dug my head into her shoulder and she cried with me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I kept my arms crossed against my chest. They didn't let us have long sleeves, and I didn't want the boys to see.

"It's not going to be the same," Arty said with a frown. "I don't even want to go! We can stay here and keep you company."

"It's okay," I smiled warmly at them both. Marty hadn't said a word. "Visiting hours end at six anyway, so you might as well make the show." It started at seven if memory served me right.

"When do you get out of this place?" Arty asked, taking a look around. Admittedly, it was a bit of a drag. I've read a few books about mental wards and the real thing certainly didn't compare.

"They said I had two days of observation, so probably tomorrow afternoon." I was surprised by my tranquility. Ever since Kelsey said the boys were tagging along, I was worried about what they'd think. But since they arrived, there hasn't been a single question about what happened. It was just like the conversation on their couch, easy and fluid. Then Marty spoke.

"If you ever need anything," he said, "we're here." He was serious and full of meaning. I only nodded, the smile fading from my lips. I looked over to Arty and he nodded solemnly. And things were quiet.

“We’re going to grab a bite to eat in the cafeteria,” Arty smiled, nudging Marty on the shoulder. They both stood up and walked out of the room, leaving Kelsey and I alone.

Neither of us spoke for a while. She had barely said a word since arriving, and I didn’t know where to start.

“Rainey isn’t real,” I whispered. She shook her head, dropping her gaze to the floor. And we were quiet again.

“Can I see?” she asked, walking a few steps closer to my chair. I nodded and held out my arms, turning them over. Kelsey’s fingers ran across the scratches I made with my fingernails. Most of them weren’t deep, but the skin was still a bright red after only one day of healing.

“He raped me,” I confided, only loud enough to be audible to Kelsey. She took a step back and removed her fingers from my arms. I crossed them again.

“Are you okay?” she asked me with a tortured tone, sympathy ringing out in every syllable.

“I’m seeing the hospital psychiatrist,” I affirmed. “It’s helping me a lot.”

“I’m glad,” she smiled. It was the most genuine smile I ever remember seeing, and I smiled back because I was glad too.

“Do you know where he is?” she asked with hesitation.

I shook my head. “He left my mom and me when I was seven.”

“How’s your mom taking it?”

“She sits in on some of my therapy sessions.”

Kelsey nodded and we were quiet, each thinking our own thoughts in our own heads. After a while, the sounds of Arty’s voice echoing down the hallway broke us both out of our stupors.

“We stole you a cupcake!” he grinned, running up to me. I took the frosted treat from him as he sat down.

“We didn’t steal it,” Marty said, standing by the doorway.

“Well, we paid for it,” Arty explained, “but you aren’t supposed to take food out of the cafeteria. Obviously, we did anyway.”

“Well, thank you,” I smiled, unwrapping the cupcake on my lap and taking a bite. The frosting was heavenly, and I remembered how little I’d eaten recently.

“Are you busy Tuesday?” Arty asked me. “Since you can’t go to the movie tonight, we need a plan before next Sunday.”

“I think I’m free,” I said between bites of cupcake.

“I work,” Kelsey reminded us, “I’m free on Wednesday though.”

All eyes were on me, so I shrugged and took another bite of the cupcake. “Whatever works,” I smiled and wiped frosting off my lips.

“We should go,” Marty said with a finger toward the clock. Visiting hours were almost over.

“See you Wednesday,” Arty said, standing with his arms out. I left my seat and gave him a hug, wrapping my tender arms around his winter coat.

“Feel better,” Kelsey said before taking her turn.

“I will,” I promised her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I was discharged Monday morning, but my mom let me stay home from school. We had a mother-daughter day, sitting around watching movies and talking. We hadn’t done that in a while. That night, before going to bed, I slipped into a pull-up and popped the pacifier in my mouth, but I didn’t have that dream again. On the contrary, I slept like a baby.

In the morning, I took a shower and dressed for school, choosing panties over a new pull-up. Apparently, like after Christmas, the ambulance in front of my house was a popular topic. Still, no one looked at me like they had that day; I had a different atmosphere about me.

“So, we were thinking about hanging out at Arty’s tomorrow,” Kelsey said as we sat down for lunch.

I looked around. “He goes to school here, doesn’t he?”

“He’s got lunch before us,” she smiled behind her sandwich. “You seem awfully interested in him.”

“He’s a nice person,” I blushed, but Kelsey didn’t buy it. I changed the subject before she had a chance to get another sentence in. “I’ve been writing.”

“What sort of writing?” she asked curiously, handing me a juice box. I punctured a hole into the top with the straw.

“I’ve only written one prose so far.”

“Can I read it?” I fished out my notebook and passed it across the table, then sat quietly for a few minutes. She closed the book before saying anything.

“Do you like it?” I asked as my face contorted into a half-anxious half-curious expression.

“It’s very well written,” she affirmed, saying no more.

“That isn’t your professional opinion.”

“My profession is psychology.” She tossed the notebook back to me. “There’s a lot more for me to say professionally.” The conversation ended there, and we each threw away the remaining trash.

“You don’t mind if I walk home from Serendipity today, do you?” I asked as we left the cafeteria.

“I guess not,” Kelsey responded, mildly curious.

“I should talk to Linda about what happened.”

“We already discussed it,” she said unexpectedly. “You work Friday.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “Well, I’d like to stop by anyway.”

“No problem.”

And it wasn’t a problem. Kelsey worked regardless, so after school we went right to Serendipity, keeping conversation light on the car ride there. She didn’t mention my poem again.

“I’ve got to go change,” she said as we walked into the front door. “I didn’t do inventory last night either, so I’ll probably need to do that first thing.”

“It’s fine,” I replied nonchalantly. “I’m just going to chat with Linda, then I’m leaving anyway.”

She nodded and headed toward the back room, waving goodbye. I estimated maybe five or six minutes until she came back out.

Linda waved to me and I raised an index finger at her, making a brisk walk down the shampoo aisle. My eyes glazed over the packages of diapers, reading the weight requirements and pacing back and forth.

Four minutes. I switched my focus on the bottles, grabbing a pastel pink one and moving on to the next isle, my pace never slowing. This time my eyes glazed over new diapers, sizing myself as an adult’s medium.

Three minutes. I ignored designs with pull-on style and belted fabrics and navigated away from medical appearances. And then only one package remained: a lavender plastic package, “Premium Choice” – the trademark brand of Serendipity.

Two minutes. I headed back down the shampoo isle to the register, placing the items on the counter and smiling at Linda.

“How are you doing, sweetheart?” she said.

“Not bad,” I answered honestly. “Things seem a lot brighter now.”

“I’m glad.” There was a smile on her face, but I could see the worry. Then she changed the subject. “These are rather odd purchases coming from you.”

“Well I’m babysitting this weekend,” I said without delay. “I don’t know about the diapers. My mom said to pick some up. I hope I got a good kind.” The excuse came so natural.

“Can’t go wrong with Premium Choice,” she laughed. It was true. I rarely bought any other brand when shopping at Serendipity.

One minute. I handed her a twenty, got some odd change back and slipped it into my pocket. She bagged my purchases for me as I zipped my coat. Then as I was walking out, I saw the door to the back room open from the corner of my eye.

I wasn’t sure why I deliberately went out of my way to hide my purchase from Kelsey. She certainly wouldn’t have made fun of me. Still, we’d only known each other a few weeks,

and although I trusted her, she wasn't yet to the status that Rainey and I had been at. Then again, Rainey didn't exist. Maybe that status is imaginary too.

Despite my detour I still beat my mother home, which gave me ample time to stash the bag in my bedroom. I knew there wasn't anything I could do until after dinner, so I waited impatiently.

"How was school?" my mother asked as we ate, no attempt at hiding concern.

"No one looked at me strangely, if that's what you're worried about."

"I worry about everything."

I smiled and so did she.

"After dinner, do you mind if I retire for the night?"

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm feeling fine, Mom." I had finished most of my food by this point. "My sleep schedule is just a tad off."

"Alright," she said with reluctance, and then cleared my plate for me.

I headed downstairs, closed my bedroom door, and tore into the bag. I opened the bottle first, taking it to the bathroom across the hall to fill it with cold water. Juice or milk would have been preferable, but I didn't want to risk going upstairs for a drink. So after the bottle was full, I screwed on the cap and went back to my room, setting it down next to my pacifier on the Lego nightstand.

Next was the package of diapers, which I observed with both curiosity and anxiety. It wasn't that I felt ashamed anymore; more so, my excitement made me nervous. After my cathartic moment, which is what my psychiatrist called my dream, I'd felt much more self confident.

After a deep breath, I ripped open the top of the package, pulling out one of the adult diapers. It was plain white, which in my eyes topped the extensive branding on the ones with a more medical appearance. It wasn't very thick, but neither were the pull-ups. I questioned the absorbency, but after unfolding it I realized it was a lot bigger than I thought.

I slipped my underwear off with my jeans, taking my place on the bed with the diaper in hand. Positioning it below my rear, I sat down and lifted my head to peek at my crotch. I was nervous; I had no idea what I was doing.

“I’ve got twenty-one chances to get it right,” I assured myself, then pulled the diaper up between my parted legs. The thickness was surprising; then again, my only comparison was to pull-ups, which were barely thicker than wearing a pad.

It was difficult to see what I was doing. Both my hands were busy holding or taping, and I had to keep my back relatively flat on the bed. Eventually, all four tabs were secured in place below my naval, nearly overlapping, and I thought a small might have been a better fit.

I stood up, the thickness still a shock. It was loose around the waist, so I tightened one of the top tapes before the sealant merged with the plastic. That seemed to work.

Everything felt different. I couldn’t even fathom a connection between the diapers and Goodnights. These added at least four times the thickness between my legs, crinkled as I moved, and covered my butt completely with cushioned padding, nearly engulfing my whole lower region. Whereas I liked the pull-ups, they never made me feel like a true baby; these diapers did.

I took the bottle and pacifier off the nightstand then the comforter off my bed. Wrapping myself up, I went out to the couch and turned on the TV, scanning for cartoons. Finally, I landed on a children’s show and cuddled the couch cushions. The sun had already gone down.

I continued to watch the screen, colors flashing over my face, the volume relatively low as not to stir suspicion from my mom. The bottle was kept in my mouth until I sipped down all the water, and then the pacifier replaced the nipple. I didn’t move for hours.

Sleep had already begun to take me when I noticed my need for a restroom. I kept still at first, trying to use the diaper, but my body refused the orders. My damn potty training still had a firm grip over my actions.

I stood up, leaving the blanket behind on the couch. I wasn’t sure what this diaper could hold and I wasn’t sure how well I’d put it on, so for a trial run I was best off standing. Closing my eyes, I let my mind erase the light hum from the television. It didn’t take long for my desires to overtake my training, and I began to wet the diaper.

Unlike the pull-up, most of the wetness soaked between my legs instead of clinging to my skin. At first I was disappointed, but then I took my place back on the couch and the wet diaper slid against my crotch. I shuddered in pleasure, feeling my cheeks turn a light pink with embarrassment.

I went to my bedroom after that, needing the privacy. I didn’t come out until morning.

Chapter Thirty

I fiddled with the pennies overlapping green paint on the front of the shambled house. Kelsey and I came directly from school, and I was thankful I'd worn panties; waking up in a damp diaper felt so euphoric, I nearly changed into another one after my shower.

"Why do the pennies spell Arty if other people live here?" I asked Kelsey as she stuffed her car keys into her purse. "Does Arty own it?"

"It's not that complicated," she replied. "It's a house full of art; it has an arty characteristic." I nodded. That made sense.

Once again, she opened the door without knocking and we made our way through the iSpy foyer. A short girl sat on the couch, and I waved and took a gamble.

"Good afternoon, Ally." She frowned. Damn it.

"You shouldn't take the twins so lightly," Kelsey said as we entered the checkerboard kitchen. The cupboards were white now; all the faces had disappeared beneath the unadorned paint.

"Why not?" I mused. "And what's with the cupboards?" The boys sat at the checkerboard table, engrossed in a new game of chess. Or perhaps it was the same game. Neither would make a move; they just stared at the board.

"Because they like any excuse to pull pranks," Arty answered my first question.

"Because we're redecorating," Marty answered my second.

"You didn't think they made a black and red floor with yellow cupboards on purpose, did you?" one of the twins said, walking past me and toward the fridge. I couldn't tell if it was the same girl from the couch. I took a glance back and the room was empty.

"Alys?" I guessed. She grabbed a juice box and frowned at me, then walked back through the seasonal room.

"Are they messing with me, or am I really bad at this?" I said with my bottom lip jutted out, and Kelsey laughed.

"You get used to it," Arty said, finally moving a pawn, only to have Marty take it. "I hate this game."

“Arty has never won a game,” Kelsey explained.

“Let’s do something else,” Arty said, standing. Marty followed suit with a satisfied grin.

There was another entryway on the other side of the table I hadn’t noticed before, but that’s the direction the boys walked. Kelsey and I followed.

The lights were dim, very homey and warm, but bright enough to see everything perfectly. Unlike the other rooms, this wasn’t personally decorated. Actually, it would have been impossible to personally decorate. Every inch of available wall space was stacked to the ceiling with bookshelves, all completely filled. In the middle of the room was a large, polished wooden table, low to the floor. Around it were six bean bag chairs of assorted colors, all dark enough to match the quiet mood of the room. We each took a seat on a separate bean bag.

“If you have all this stuff in here, and spend so much time decorating, why does the outside of your house look so tattered?” It was a question I never thought to ask.

“We don’t like wasting time on things the weather will wash away,” Arty replied.

“And we don’t like doing touch-ups every year,” came Marty’s shortly after.

I nodded in understanding and our conversation shifted to school. Kelsey and Arty were talking about a teacher I’d never heard of, so I did my best at a conversation with Marty. It proved difficult. He was more of a listener. I found myself prattling on about my life before I’d moved. Most of it was about my family and how we all acted during the holidays. I didn’t notice at first, but Kelsey and Arty had stopped talking and began listening to my stories too.

Then one story led to another and everyone was talking about their own funny anecdotes. Even Marty told one about his 7th grade class picture and how he’d worn ski goggles. This kept up for hours until one of us heard another’s stomach rumble and we decided it was best to make dinner.

Kelsey went ahead, the boys behind her, and finally me. But I never made it far into the kitchen. After a few steps, I felt a layer of chilled goo splat over my head, dousing my hair and shirt completely. I stood there in shock as the pair of voices giggled above me. I slid my finger across my shoulder, looked at the brown substance, and licked it off my finger.

“Pudding?” I asked, confused, looking up at the girls peering off a balcony I didn’t know existed, overlooking the entire kitchen. They giggled louder. The boys looked awestruck, and Kelsey was the first to speak.

“Are you okay?” They all seemed very concerned, perhaps because of my recent misfortunes.

“I could use a paper towel,” I affirmed, “and a spoon.”

The boys laughed and Kelsey smiled. I took a handful of pudding and whipped it up at the twins, who both shrieked and backed out of sight. Then I laughed too.

I spent a bit of time cleaning up with Kelsey’s help. The twins mopped the floor, repeatedly stating that it was worth it.

“Your shirt needs to be washed,” Kelsey said very straightforwardly. “As soon as possible is best.”

“You can borrow one of mine while we wash yours,” Arty offered. “Marty’s would be like wearing a pool tarp, and I think the twins are too small.”

“Thank you very much,” I smiled and followed him back to the foyer, taking a left to a small flight of stairs that turned left again and went to the long hallway landing, overlooking each room as we passed through them. We walked past two doors, both on the right and across the hall from the seasonal room. The moon was much closer this high up. Then the last door was about where the twins were standing. Some of the pudding was visible on the wall. Kelsey smiled up at me and I waved. Marty had disappeared and the twins were just about done cleaning.

We walked into Arty’s bedroom, and I stood there in shock. All four walls were plain white without decoration. Most of the furniture was in the center of the room. I kept near the doorway while he went to his dresser.

“What is it?” he asked, handing me a blue striped button down shirt.

“Your house is so colorful and creative, and your room is so...”

“Well, this is my sanctuary,” he said, looking around. “Everything I paint in here gets boring pretty fast, and then I paint the walls white again. The problem is that my mind is limited to things I know, and everything I know loses effect in a few weeks. Then I can’t stand to look at it anymore.”

“That’s unfortunate,” I said sincerely, feeling sorry for the empty room. It looked void of personality, which was a big misinterpretation of Arty.

“Well, I’m going to wait downstairs,” he said with a smile, then shut the door behind him. I changed into his shirt, and he was right about it fitting me. Although I didn’t look quite as cute, I felt a little warm inside.

“Looks good on you,” Marty mocked as I came back downstairs. I rolled my eyes and handed my stained shirt to Kelsey, who promptly left the room. When she came back, she was without my clothes.

We had macaroni and cheese for lunch. The twins ate with us. Then we all retired to the library again, filling the capacity for people per bean bag chair. We went back to talking about our memories, the twins holding up most of the post-eating conversation. I couldn’t understand it, but sitting there and talking about nothing was the most fun I could remember having.

“I don’t like roses,” who-I-guessed-was-Ally whined. “I don’t like any flowers, really.”

“My mom’s a florist,” I spoke up. “So I know a whole lot about flowers.”

“You wrote a prose about flowers,” Kelsey reminded me.

“Yeah, sort of,” I shrugged.

“Read it!” she chimed happily. The notion got only encouragement from the rest of the group, even the twin who hated flowers.

“I don’t have my notebook,” I argued.

“I’ll go get it,” Kelsey said, standing and bolting from the room, leaving us mostly in awkward silence. Suddenly I felt a little regret for having brought my notebook. My writing was one thing I was shy about.

It didn’t take long for her to fetch the notebook from her car. She handed me the book and I opened it to the proper page past my math notes.

“Do I have to read it?” I asked, emphasizing the I.

“You’ll do it with the right inflection,” Arty said, and everyone agreed. “No one reads a poem like the author.”

I took a deep breath and began.

“As a young girl with wax crayons, I colored flowers red. Every winter, my mother would decorate the dining room table with elegant stars of crimson in vases of solid white; a liquid aberration staining the monotony of colorless walls and snow coated streets behind glass frames. Then on the days when Mother would stress my social inadequacies, I’d take a resident from the vase and show it the landscape of uniformed white – separation of sky and Earth differentiated only by what you could and couldn’t walk on. Then I’d leave my radiant companion high on a hill, the stem dipped into the snow for when it got thirsty and decided to drink up the tedium. I’d

sit beside it, hoping some color would rub off on me, and watch the children toss snowballs until the grayscale sky dipped darker. I'd head home to sit again at the table, to watch the flowers glow and wonder how many Christmases it would be until I blossomed."

I expected a silence to follow, but everyone applauded. Standing, I took a bow.

"Molly," Arty spoke first, "could I paint that?"

"What?" I was caught off guard.

"For my room," he explained. "I could make one half of the room a snowball fight with a red flower on a hill in the background, and the other half a vase of poinsettias on a dining table."

I was flustered and didn't respond.

"You don't have to let me, of course," he offered when I wouldn't answer. "I just think that's something I wouldn't hate waking up to every day."

"Yeah," I whispered. "Yeah, you can paint it."

"Will you help me? You know the scene better than I do."

"I'd love to," I smiled.

Epilogue

"You have to sign your name," Arty said to me.

"Why?"

"Because you helped me paint it!" he defended.

"I hardly helped."

He smiled. "All in all, I think you did more work than me."

My cheeks burned. "Fine, give me a brush."

The room didn't look much different. Arty decided to keep the white walls and trace with a calligraphic black stroke style for the outline of the scenery, including the children, the

snowballs, and the table. The only things that had any color were poinsettias, and somehow it looked more real than my memory did.

I stand corrected. The one other ounce of color was Arty's signature in the bottom corner of one of the walls written in blue paint.

"Do you have purple?" I asked curiously.

"Downstairs in the kitchen drawer next to the dish washer," he said, starting to clean up the paint cans.

I stepped out of the room, catching a glance of Alys in the kitchen from off the balcony. Like Arty had said, it didn't take long to learn which twin is which. Within the three weeks Arty and I had been working on his room I noticed a few specific tells, and by this point it almost came naturally.

"Hey, Alys!" I called, and she looked up at me. "Throw me a tube of purple paint." She reached into the drawer Arty had specified and tossed it up to me.

"Thanks," I called before stepping back into the room. I squeezed a small puddle of purple onto one of the unclean pallets and Arty handed me a clean paintbrush. Careful with my strokes, I signed "Molly" below "Arty" in the corner of his room. The blue and purple went well together.

"So it's done," Arty said with a smile. I took a seat on his bed next to him.

"Do you like it?" I asked curiously.

"Absolutely," he chimed.

"What if you get sick of it?"

"Then you'll come up with a new idea."

"If you asked me to, I probably would," I answered honestly.

He smiled at me, put his hand on mine, and laced our fingers together. After that, everything felt real. And the one thing I've learned these past few months is that nothing is more breathtaking than real.