

A Tale of Woe - Preview

Book 1 of The Old State Hospital for Women

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Part I

That's How They Get You

Chapter 1

This Was All a Mistake

Claire wondered why they had needed to put her into a hospital gown for this. It was all a mistake; all a misunderstanding. It would all be cleared up soon enough, once the Doctor had seen her. Maybe they would send her home, maybe they would hold her for a few days. 72 hours was what she'd always heard on TV.

So there was no need for the gown, she thought. There was also no need for the zip ties that the officer accompanying the paramedics had placed on her hands. "For your own protection," he'd said. Protection from what? From who?

This was all a mistake that would be corrected soon, she hoped. *Perhaps even in time to get back to work*. This is what she thought as she sat in the waiting room, her hands tied, the gown's thin fabric feeling strange and unfamiliar.

The hospital itself was strange and unfamiliar. The walls of the waiting room were utilitarian, painted cinder blocks. *Like a high school cafeteria*, she thought. She sat on one of those metal-legged, vinyl-cushioned benches that looked like three chairs fused together — the kind of furniture that existed only in waiting rooms and nowhere else. There were metal bars over the cross-hatched shatterproof glass windows. Fluorescent lights buzzed in the drop-ceiling overhead. The place was, in a word, institutional.

The hospital staff went about their business, paying Claire no mind. She detected some murmured voices from the direction of the triage desk. She could not hear words, just sounds. The tile floor was scuffed but very clean under her feet. *Why didn't they give me socks*, she wondered, *don't you usually get socks in a place like this?*

This was all a mistake, it will all be OK once I see the Doctor, she told herself, and waited.

At that moment, someone called her name to the desk.

Claire got up as elegantly as one could in her style of dress and state of helplessness, and walked up to the front desk slowly. A woman sat looking at a com-

puter — presumably some kind of nurse. “Claire?” she confirmed without looking up.

“Yes.”

“What’s your date of birth?” the nurse asked. This was the universal medical question. Claire was used to being asked this repeatedly at every checkup, lab test, and occasional trip to the ER. Nobody ever seemed to remember it from the last time, no matter how many times she told them. In this unfamiliar environment it was almost comforting.

“September 23, 2000. I’m here because...”

“No need, I’ve got it all right here in the computer. You’re already in the system. We’ll get you to a room as soon as your doctor does your intake exam.”

Hesitatingly, Claire asked, “Room? I don’t think I need a room, I’m not going to be...”

“Don’t tell *me*,” said the woman, “talk to the Doctor about it.”

The nurse gestured at two large men, orderlies or assistants of some kind, very muscular, with tattoos, standing on either side of a pair of large metal doors. The men looked like football players, or bouncers. The same kind of guy probably had both of those jobs, at different times in his life. From tackling opponents to wrangling drunks, a natural progression. And some of them, she thought, ended up here. *Seems a bit much*, she thought, *I certainly don’t need wrangling*.

“She’s going to 423,” the nurse said to the orderlies, who nodded in acknowledgement. The nurse pressed a key card against a card reader on the wall. It was the kind of modern electronic fixture that always looked out of place in an old building like this.

The door beeped, and opened under its own power. Claire knew it was not the kind of door that she would be able to reopen, once she was on the other side of it. The orderlies flanked her and stood silently waiting to follow her through it.

One step at a time on the cold hard floor, she stepped through. With a pneumatic whoosh, the door closed behind her.

The hallway beyond the door looked even older, as if she had stepped through a portal from a DMV office into a historical site. The walls were now brick, and the windows looked like they might have once opened, before the hinges were painted over. There were rusty bars on the windows. Opposite to the windows, wooden doors lined the hallway. The doors had numbers on them, but nothing else to indicate what was in the room. They did not have windows, but wooden slats that looked like they once tilted open to allow light and air in. These too, of course, were long since painted over.

The orderlies led her to a room numbered 423, and opened the door. It was a non-descript little medical exam room. It looked like it had been repainted many times. The furnishings looked old but not as old as the

building itself. There was a medicine cabinet, a metal exam table, and a mirror on the wall.

The men left her alone without saying anything and closed the door. The lights in this room also buzzed. The room smelled faintly of disinfectant. She sat down on the chair to try to wait for the doctor.

Her eyes drifted around the room, not really seeing anything until something caught her peripheral vision. A shape? A figure? Someone?

The mirror! Claire did not mean to look in the mirror, as she did not want to see her reflection. There it was anyway, before she had time to brace herself. Her own blue eyes stared back at her, bloodshot and filled with fear. Her brown hair was mussed and uneven from everything she'd been through. The baby-blue hospital gown hung on her casually, nearly falling off one shoulder. Her legs were bare and goose-pimpled in the clammy hospital air.

She saw the nervousness; the anxiety. She felt sorry for that girl in the mirror, before she even had time to realize it was herself.

A knock came at the door. Doctors always knocked before entering a room, but then came in anyway before you had time to answer. The door opened before Claire could even turn her head.

A man in his mid-30s entered the room, wearing a

white lab coat over a crisp dress shirt and business slacks. The hard soles of his leather shoes clicked on the floor. This was not the kind of doctor who went around in scrubs all the time, to show the world that he was someone who got his hands dirty. This was not the kind of hospital where a doctor needed to make that kind of performance.

He had a serious, composed look on his face, and the five o'clock shadow of a man who shaved once a day in the early morning and considered that enough even though it wasn't. His brown hair was cut short, neatly combed. He moved with a confidence that made him seem taller than he was.

He removed his glasses, which were apparently single-focal and not fit for close vision, and glanced over Claire's chart with hard, piercing brown eyes. Then the eyes turned on Claire.

For a brief foolish second, something fluttered in Claire's chest. She felt something like relief. Finally, here was someone who knew what he was doing. Someone who would see the mistake, the misunderstanding, the absurdity of all this.

Surely he would see what was going on.

"Name and date of birth, please," he demanded. There it was, asking for the same info again and again.

"Claire Allman, September 23, 2000," she answered.

"Do you know what today's date is, Claire?" he asked.

Another routine question. His voice sounded as if he asked it a dozen times a day. There was no urgency, no recognition that she'd been dragged into something bizarre and terrifying. He wasn't tired, or bored, or disinterested. He sounded *professional* enough. But there was no sympathy in it, no flicker of understanding for what she was going through. He was just too calm, she thought.

But the date? She knew the date! This was her chance — her chance to explain everything to this man who looked like someone with authority. Someone who could fix this, make everything normal again.

But something about him — the white coat, the neat stubble, the click of his shoes, the way his eyes seemed to take in everything at once — pressed down on her. She couldn't get the words out.

She hesitated, then blurted, "December 20... no, I mean, December 4. 2023."

The Doctor didn't react. He simply wrote something on the chart.

"Are you pregnant, or think you might be pregnant?"

"No."

"Do you know *why* you're here?"

"Of... of course! I can explain everything. I'm not supposed to be here. They only called 9-1-1 as a precaution, it's company policy." As an H.R. generalist in the same office where her supervisor had made that

call, Claire could have recited the policy chapter and verse.

“Let’s get started with your exam,” the Doctor said, as if she hadn’t spoken at all.

“What’s going on? What are you going to do with me?” she asked. Her voice was thin, shaking with fear.

“Claire.” He focused his eyes on hers. Calm. Stern. Unshakable. “Cooperate.”

She said nothing, lowering her eyes, avoiding his gaze like someone backing down from a confrontation before it even happened. He motioned toward the exam table and patted it once with his hand. “Sit here,” he said.

Silently, she moved from the chair to the table. The shift felt wrong. Chairs were normal life. You sat in them every day. The exam table was different. Cold paper. Metal edges. A place for *patients*.

It was difficult to get up onto the table with her hands still tied. Fortunately there was a small footstool, which partly made up for the inability to use her hands to pull herself up. Her bare legs brushed the crinkling paper as she climbed up. She wasn’t supposed to be on a table like this. She wasn’t supposed to be someone who belonged here.

The Doctor stepped closer, the chart tucked under one arm. “Look straight ahead,” he said.

She did as she was told. He lifted a small penlight and shone it briefly into each eye. “Good.” He added a note

on the chart.

He moved to her side, took out a stethoscope, and fitted the earpieces into his ears. Then he leaned toward her.

He pressed the stethoscope to the bare skin of her upper back, at a spot where the gown already left her exposed. The metal was shockingly cold. “Breathe in.” She shuddered, silently, trying to hold herself together. Another note on the chart.

Without changing his stance, he shifted the stethoscope to her front, over her heart. She closed her eyes. She tried to will her heartbeat to slow, terrified he would write something down — something that would make all this worse. She didn’t know the word *tachycardia*, but she knew the feeling of her pulse racing when she was anxious. She was shaking. Another note.

He took her hands — still bound by the zip-ties — and lifted them slightly. He felt for her pulse and timed it with his wristwatch, for what seemed like a long time. Even through his latex gloves, the prolonged contact made her acutely aware of the warmth and firmness of his hands. Another pen-scratch on the chart.

He took out a chrome-plated reflex hammer with a rubber head. “Uncross your legs, Claire.” She hadn’t even realized she’d crossed them. She shifted and uncrossed them, her bare legs dangling off the edge of the table.

He placed his hand on her knee to steady her leg and tapped just below the kneecap. Her leg jerked; her

bare foot twitched. He repeated the test on the other side, identical, then wrote another note. “Excellent,” was all he said.

Claire waited for more — perhaps a chance to explain herself — but he simply closed the chart with a soft snap.

“That will do,” he said.

She blinked. “That’s... that’s it?”

“For now.” He didn’t elaborate. “You’ll be taken to your room shortly.”

“Room? No, I — I don’t need a room. I shouldn’t even be here. There’s been a mistake, you can see that. If you just talk to somebody, just check something, you’ll see. Call my boss. Call my sister — Liz. You have her number, she’s my emergency contact... They’ll tell you, I don’t need to be here, I don’t need a room. I just want to go home. Please...”

Her voice cracked. She was close to breaking down. This man had been her last hope. He placed his hand on her back. It was the kind of gesture that some people might have called comforting.

“Claire,” he said calmly, “you are not in charge here.”

She looked straight ahead, said nothing.

“Stand up,” he ordered.

He waited as she sat still for a few seconds, with some residual defiance against doing what she was told simply

because she was being told. He waited, as if he had all day to wait, and she stood up.

He opened the door, looked out into the hallway, and nodded at whoever was out there. In came a different female nurse, a middle-aged red-haired woman, and another one of the orderlies. They said nothing. Presumably they'd come to take her away, but now they too were waiting for whatever would happen next.

"Turn around."

She turned around, facing the table, and leaned her hands on it slightly to steady herself. At least, she thought, they'd tied her hands in the front, so she could at least partially use them. She could see herself in the mirror again now. She looked paler. Her eyes were wide open. She looked down, to avoid staring into her own face too long.

"Let's get something straight, Claire," he intoned, his voice still oddly calm, calmer than his words would normally indicate, "I am in charge of your treatment here. I decide how long you stay, I will decide when you will leave. Your time here could be pleasant, or unpleasant, depending on your behavior."

Claire said nothing. She was finished talking to this man. He was not going to help her. Was not interested in helping her. And she knew, somehow, that unlike the others he *saw* her. The others didn't even notice her unease, her humiliation, her overwhelming wish to be somewhere else. He saw it, he just didn't care.

With just a few words from him, all of her hopes had been dashed. She had nothing to say to him.

“Not talking at all, are we?” he said, still with that eerie calm in his voice, “I do not normally do this to new patients on their first day, but you need to be shown that your behavior has consequences in this facility.”

Claire was frozen. What kind of consequences?

“Typically, you would be shown to your room now and provided with a change of clothing. Pajamas, robes, slippers, that sort of thing. You’re going to stay like *this* for a while. Additionally. . .”

Her heart sank. She did not like the word “additionally,” *how much worse could it get?*

“Additionally,” he continued, “You are *not* authorized to wear any outside garments. The gown is enough for you, until your behavior improves. Let’s get these off you now.” He looked at the nurse.

What? she thought, *what the hell does that mean? What garments? . . . he doesn’t mean they’re going to. . .*

“Hold still, sweetie,” the woman whispered in a thick Southern accent. She untied the lower of two pairs of strings on the back of Claire’s hospital gown, so that its two sides now kept her covered up only by gravity. She reached inside the gown, without fully opening it, and pulled Claire’s underwear down off of her hips.

Oh my god, I was right, they took my. . . I’m going to have to walk around this, with my. . ., Claire could not

even finish the thought, it was so horrible.

Her panties fell to the floor around her feet. Gingerly, she stepped out of them and left them there, not sure what to do with them now.

“Show her to her room, Pam,” said the Doctor to the other two.

Claire, mortified, said nothing. She could not believe what was happening.

“Come on, honey,” said Pam, “this way.”

Claire followed her through the door, and suddenly realized the gown was still untied. There was nothing back there keeping it closed except gravity and good luck. Had they left it like this on purpose, or just forgotten to retie them? She was afraid to ask. How was she supposed to walk like this? Very slowly and carefully. She placed one bare foot in front of the other, and tried to move as stiffly as possible, keeping her back completely straight. *If only, she thought, if only they’d tied my hands behind my back.*

The hallway was long, with many more doors like the one she’d just been in. She followed the employees at some distance, due to her slower pace. They did not seem to mind; they did not stop and wait for her or scold her to speed up. They acted like this was normal. Was it normal here? What kind of place was this, where this might be normal?

They rounded a corner, turned right. For a few seconds, she couldn't see them, and they couldn't see her. How did they know she was even still following? She continued following them, she had nowhere else to go.

"Well, well," said a male voice from the hallway behind her, "you must be new."

She turned her head, and saw a man in greasy janitor's overalls, carrying a mop and pushing a wheeled bucket. He looked to be in his forties, with a beard going gray in uneven patches. A grimy red bandana covered his hair — whatever hair he still had — the kind of thing that looked like it doubled as a rag when he needed one. He wore thick yellow cleaning gloves, the industrial kind, not the thin medical ones the Doctor used. Everything about him said maintenance, janitorial, the people who came in after hours to empty trash cans and mop floors.

At her office, people like this didn't talk to her. They moved around her, silent and invisible, doing their work while she did hers on nights when she worked late. That was the unspoken arrangement. And yet here he was.

"You must've really done *something* to get your hands tied up like that on the first day! Usually Doc's nicer to the new ones. He must have something special planned for *you*."

Claire said nothing, and continued to walk. Slowly. Trusting her slow pace would keep the gown in place in spite of nothing physically holding it. How long was

this man going to be back there, watching her walk? Now she really wanted to get around that corner, where the others had gone. But she dared not speed up.

Oh God, oh God, please let the gown stay shut, she thought.

“Name’s Bill, by the way,” the man continued, as if oblivious to her unease, “Ol’ Bill, the gals all call me. Don’t mind me, I’m friendly! It’s the other patients you need to look out for. They might get jealous once they see Doc has a new *project* going!”

Claire tried not to even think about these words. She continued to place one foot in front of the other. *The gown stayed in place*, she thought.

As she rounded the corner, Bill got in one last parting shot, “it’s gonna be nice having a new pair of cheeks peekin’ out around here!”

Chapter 2

Accepting Reality

The slow march down the hallway continued, Claire walking even slower now that she'd had external confirmation that something was "peeking out" the slit of the back of the gown.

That guy saw me, she kept thinking, *He saw my...*, but again she couldn't even bring herself to think the thought. She was too mortified, too humiliated. *He was so... how can anyone talk to me like that? What did I do to deserve this?*, she thought.

The nurse and the orderly came to a door at the end of the hallway, another metal door that required badge access to open. It opened into a room that was slightly less ancient in feel than the hallway had been. Unlike the hallway, the floor was carpeted. She instinctively curled her toes into it, but it did not give, it was worn

and crushed from years of other people walking on it. Still, it was warm and welcome after the cold tile.

“This is the wing you’ll be staying in, sweetie,” said Pam, “it has everything you need — bedrooms, bathrooms, cafeteria, common areas. . .”

They were in a break room and sitting area with multiple chairs and tables and couches. There was an impossibly old TV, muted and tuned to some shopping channel. There was a large commercial coffee pot, that had clearly been sitting turned on for hours, filling the room with the smell of burnt coffee. The couches had a worn look, like thrift-store furniture. There was a shelf of books, all of which appeared to be heavily-used romance novels, and a rack of magazines, all of which were the kind of thing you normally see on supermarket checkout aisles, also years old and heavily used.

It looks like an Old Folks’ home in here, Claire thought, remembering the times years ago she’d visited her great-grandmother, *They wouldn’t let her leave without supervision, either. It was for her own good, they said. She was 90 and she’d been in there for years and years. Oh God, I could be here until I’m 90. . .*

There was a murmur of female voices. At the other end of the large room, too far away to hear clearly, Claire could see a group of other patients sitting around talking to a nurse. She felt a weight in her stomach. She wasn’t ready to sit in a group with a bunch of strangers. She wasn’t ready for anything.

“That’s the group therapy session, sweetie,” said the nurse guiding her, “you’ll be joining it soon. But first let’s continue the Grand Tour!”

They walked over to another area adjacent to the common room, Claire feeling somewhat relieved she did not have to join the group session just yet, but also wishing she could simply *sit down*. It contained a sort of counter, or desk, behind which another nurse was seated.

“This is our nurse’s station. This is where you can find one of us if you ever need anything, sweetie, day or night. This is also where you’ll get any outside prescribed medications, like allergy medicine and birth control, but only after they’ve been reviewed and approved by the Doctor. Any new *psychiatric medications* might be given here, depending on the prescription, or they might be administered directly by a nurse. All of that is in review right now.”

They walked down another hallway. Pam took Claire right up to the door of a room, with “217” in metal numbers on it. “This is going to be your room, honey.”

Pam opened the door, and Claire was taken aback by the state of the room and its furnishings. Even by the standards of *this* hospital, it looked like it had been lived in too much and cared for too little. There were six metal beds, not modern hospital beds, *the old kind*, thought Claire, the kind with metal rails, not plastic. There were six small wooden dressers, very scuffed and scratched. There was a small table with some chairs

around it. The room was kept warm by ancient metal radiators along the wall. There were large windows, metal-barred of course.

“How many patients live in here?” Claire asked. She imagined the room crowded, filled with noise and chatter. And she had no idea what her roommates were going to be like. Were they like her, sent here for the wrong reasons, or did they *belong* in here? Was she going to feel safe sleeping in a room with five strangers?

“Just you and one other young lady, about your age,” said the nurse, “we have a lot of vacant spots in the hospital these days. There’s not as many girls that need to be here, as there used to be.”

I don’t need to be here, thought Claire. She sat down on the nearest bed, eager to get something solid under her. The mattress felt thin, more like a pallet than a bed. The metal rails were cold against her thigh. She could smell the rust.

“Don’t get comfortable yet,” said Pam, “I’ve got more places to show you.”

“When do I get issued clothes?” asked Claire, “to put in my dresser?”

“Oh, sweetie, *you* don’t get any until the Doctor says you can have them. Until then we’ll change you into a new clean gown whenever you need one. You’ll be allowed to have your hands free while you sleep, and for bathroom breaks — but until the Doctor says otherwise we have to put the cuffs back on after. Here, honey, let

me see your hands.”

Claire held out her bound hands for the nurse to see. “Change these,” the nurse said to the orderly, “so she sees how it works.”

The orderly reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of scissors, and cut the tie on Claire’s wrists. Involuntarily, she shook her wrists, feeling the freedom. Then she remembered, like a person remembering a briefly-forgotten problem upon waking up from sleep, and her hands moved automatically around behind her back. Her fingers felt the fabric of the two sides of the gown and held them tight together, making sure it stayed closed. She fumbled for the strings, trying to find them and tie them while she had time. *It’s like trying to tie your shoes behind your back*, she thought, *I don’t think I’m going to have time...*

“That’s right baby, stretch out for a minute. But don’t get used to it,” said the nurse, “here hold them back out for us!”

The orderly produced not another pair of zip-ties, but a pair of stainless metal handcuffs, and put them on Claire’s wrists. In spite of the weight and the clanky metal, these were better than the ties, she realized. They allowed slightly more freedom of movement of the hands. Not enough to get her hands behind her back, though, as Claire soon discovered.

Claire was not surprised at all by this, at this point. She simply nodded and then hung her head, and followed

the nurse back out the door.

“Now, honey, you’ll be able to leave your room whenever you want, and go to the other patient-accessible areas. That includes the breakroom that we just saw, and the bathroom. Now for the bathroom you’re gonna have a towel, a bar of soap, a little bitty bottle of shampoo, a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, sanitary supplies, and a hair brush. It’s your responsibility to keep track of all these, and to hang your towel up to dry after use so it doesn’t get moldy. You get new towels on Tuesdays and Fridays...”

While Claire recoiled at the thought of moldy old towels, and also at the idea that she was going to even be here long enough to need all of this stuff, Pam led her into a large and very “institutional” bathroom. The whole room looked like the inside of a drained swimming pool, like it was designed to be flooded. The walls and floor were all made of the same tile. There were several toilets and showers, each mercifully in their own little stalls, *just like at the gym*, Claire thought, *but there’s no lockers*. Clearly someone in her position was not allowed to have anything that needed to be locked up or kept safe. Suddenly, she remembered, in all the commotion she did not know where any of her *stuff* was. Her phone, purse, wallet, money, identification, it was all missing. It was all taken from her in the ambulance, when they made her change outfits. She wondered if it was all sitting somewhere in the same laundry bag with her clothes. *I’ll never see my phone again just like I’ll never see my panties again*, she thought.

The room also had another feature that Claire had not seen in a gym, and which gave her a sinking feeling to behold: a row of old, metal, clawfoot bathtubs along one wall. These had both faucets and showerheads on flexible metal hoses. They had no curtains around them; anyone using them would be exposed and public for everyone to see. Claire shuddered. The tile felt very cold under her feet. She wondered who used these, and if they did so of their own will.

Next was the cafeteria. It looked exactly like the cafeteria of every school Claire had ever been to: Formica tables, stacks of plastic trays, the bustle of kitchen staff, the smell of hot food. The nurse announced, “this is where you will have three meals a day. A schedule of the meals and today’s menu is written here,” she gestured at a whiteboard on the wall, “make sure you do not miss meal time or you will have to wait for the next one.”

Claire was hungry but it did not seem to be meal time at the moment. Her ambulance had arrived at her job shortly before lunch, and now lunch was over — she’d missed it. She’d have to wait for dinner.

“And now,” the nurse announced almost excitedly, “it’s time to go meet the other girls!”

Claire had a look of silent dread on her face.

“Don’t you fret, sweetie,” reassured the nurse, “I’m turning you over to your group now. Nurse Laura will take it from here. But, if you need me, just ask for

Nurse Pam. I'll see you bright and early tomorrow anyway, you're one of my *special* patients. I take care of all my little babies."

Claire took a good look at Pam. She looked about 60, her dark reddish hair was clearly not naturally that color anymore, and it nearly matched her burgundy scrubs. "Take care, honey," said Pam as she and the silent orderly walked away. She patted Claire on the back. The touch was gentle, and that somehow made it worse. It reminded Claire of the gown, as if she needed a reminder.

She knows, thought Claire, *she could have tied those strings. It must be written down on my chart not to do it.* In spite of her empathy, Pam was clearly not someone who was going to bend any rules.

Cautiously, Claire approached the group. She felt like she'd just been dropped off for her first day of school. Eight women sat in a loose ring of chairs. Some slouched, some sat upright, all facing a nurse who stood at the edge of the circle in green scrubs, holding a clipboard. This nurse was younger than Pam — maybe forty, dark hair pulled back, sharp face. She didn't smile.

She turned, and her eyes quickly looked over Claire — the gown, the handcuffs, the bare feet — and then she nodded as if Claire's condition was something she expected. She gestured to an empty chair. "Have a

seat, Claire.” Her voice was calm, clipped, professional, and disinterested.

Claire sat down, the carpet rough under her feet, the metal handcuffs clinking softly as she laid her hands in her lap.

The other patients glanced at her. The patients were wearing an assortment of pajamas, bathrobes, even scrubs like the ones the nurses wore. No one was wearing just a hospital gown. No one was barefoot. Everyone wore socks, bedroom slippers, or both. No one was in handcuffs.

One girl in particular caught her eye. She was pale, not unhealthily so, but like the natural paleness of someone who spends most of their time indoors, in dark places like basement bars and the public library. Her dark hair looked too black to be natural; clearly it was dyed. She wore a white terry-cloth bathrobe and matching slippers, and that seemed to be all. No pajamas were visible under it. The robe’s belt was tied in a single loose half-knot — a knot Claire wouldn’t have trusted for one second — and the girl plainly didn’t give it a thought. Claire couldn’t decide which she envied more: the robe, or the unconcern. She leaned back in her chair, in a posture that was both relaxed and defiant, taking up more space than the other women, like she was in her own living room and everyone else was the visitor.

She looked like she was waiting for something. Her legs were crossed, one slipper dangling precariously from

her toes, as if she didn't care whether it fell. *How can anyone be that relaxed in here?* Claire wondered. She looked about Claire's age, maybe a little younger. Her expression was flat, but her eyes — the kind of grey-green eyes that looked a different shade under every kind of light — were alive and watchful. Briefly, those eyes turned on Claire. They took her in just like the nurse had, as if this mind also was analyzing her.

Laura turned to the black-haired stranger. "Misty, why don't you continue what you were saying."

The black-haired girl remained silent. A few of the other patients glanced at her. She didn't look at Laura. "I wasn't saying anything."

Laura made a small note on her clipboard. "Avoidance. That's alright. We can come back to you."

Claire didn't understand what had just happened, but all the other patients had turned to stare at Misty. Her slipper dropped on the carpet with a slight thud, where it lay a few seconds before her foot slipped back into it.

Who is she?, Claire wondered.

Laura moved on, her tone smooth and practiced. "Now, as I was saying, today we're focusing on acceptance. Accepting where we are. Accepting the help we're given. Accepting responsibility for our choices."

Claire swallowed. The words felt like they were aimed at her even though Laura wasn't looking at her. With-

out warning, Laura turned directly to Claire, “And now for our newest member. Is there anything you’d like to share with the group, Claire?”

Claire was like a deer in headlights. She folded her hands in her lap, the cuffs cold against her skin, and tried to shrink. She didn’t know the rules here yet, like everyone else presumably did. She didn’t know what she could say that wouldn’t make things even worse.

“I... ugh...”, she stammered.

“Start with the basics, Claire. Tell us who you are, your age, where you’re from, what’s been going on in your life. School. Work. And then tell us how you got here.” All of the other patients were now staring at her, except for the black-haired one, Misty, who seemed to be looking away, her mind somewhere else.

Claire suddenly found herself unable to look anyone in the eye, and spoke to her own feet:

“My... name is Claire M-Michelle Allman.” She rarely spoke her middle name, and hearing it out loud reminded her of her mother telling her that it was like a little magic spell to give her strength. She felt like she needed it. “I’m... 23. I work at... I work at... J. Dunbar and Company... Human Resources... I’m... I help people, I answer people’s questions about their benefits... I help people file claims for... for... *mental health*...”

With the words “mental health,” she felt tears filling her eyes, and buried her face in her hands. She knew

they were all still looking at her.

Someone must have looked like they were about to say something, because Claire heard the Nurse say, “Give her space, ladies. Let her finish.”

When she could collect herself enough to speak, she continued, “I’m here because I made a mistake. It was my mistake, but it was a little one, and I don’t need to be *here* because of it! You must know someone who can... fix it? Get me out of here?!”

“Thank you, Claire,” said Laura as if Claire had not just asked her a direct and concrete question. “As you all can see, we all have a ways to go towards accepting reality as it is. We’re all going to be working on it together.”

Chapter 3

You're Not the Only One

Claire remained sitting in the breakroom after Laura had dismissed the group. All of the patients were “free to go,” to go back to their rooms or mill about the wing. As they shuffled off they could hear faint echoes across the room and down various hallways. She thought she could hear them talking about her.

“Did you see how scared she was? I wish Laura would be nicer to her, she doesn’t look like she could handle much. . . ,” said a voice.

“Shh. She’ll hear you!” said another.

The voices faded away, until the only sound left was the buzz of the lights overhead in the drop-ceiling and

the occasional metallic clank of the radiators.

There was no planned activity until dinner. Claire didn't know what to do, so she just stayed where she was. She thought about going to her own room, but this would involve extra walking, and walking meant worrying about the gown. It was better to stay here. She sat in her chair, staring at her hands in the metal cuffs, and contemplating her situation.

In spite of her state of exposure — bare feet, bare legs, the gown hardly covering her thighs, short sleeves, the open back — she was not cold. Quite the contrary, she was if anything feeling a bit too warm. Like many old buildings with steam radiators, every room was either too hot or too cold, and this one was too hot. You could smell the heat. Claire had perspired more than usual during the ordeal of the group session, and the gown now clung to her sweaty skin in ways that made Claire even more concerned about how it might act if she stood up. Another reason to stay put.

While she was thinking about this, someone spoke her name. "Claire?"

She looked up. It was the girl from the therapy group. The dark haired one, in the white bathrobe. This outfit actually made a lot of sense in this room today. This person wasn't dressed like this for no reason, she knew this place well, and she was dressed for the "climate" in here.

Claire took a second to respond. "It's Misty, right?"

“That’s what *they* call me,” responded the other, “I prefer to go by Mystique, or Myst for short. And trust me, I can hear if you don’t say it with a ‘y.’” Claire chuckled at this joke, out of politeness.

Myst came and sat down near Claire, not in a chair but on the floor, taking off her slippers and crossing her legs like she was sitting around a campfire. This afforded her a closer position to Claire than even the nearest chair did. Claire looked down at her. She was all knees and elbows, like a spider-monkey. The robe accommodated all this movement, somehow. Claire wondered if she had *anything* on under it.

“So, new girl,” Myst asked with great curiosity but no detectable contempt, “I want to know. What did you do on your first day, to end up like this? *Everybody* comes in the front door in zip-ties and a hospital gown. The gown tells me you must be what they call a *Special Project*, I know because I’m one too. But the cuffs, those are probably *punishment* for something...”

“If we’re both the same kind of patient,” Claire asked, “why did they let you have a robe and slippers? Can I get a robe and slippers?”

“Every project is different,” explained Myst, her voice softened, “it just means we don’t get treated like everybody else. It doesn’t mean we get treated like each other.”

“Oh,” said Claire, her hope evaporating. She was off on the wrong foot already. She was already being singled

out.

"Now, how'd you get those cuffs?" Myst's curiosity was unsated. But Claire detected something else in her voice: not morbid curiosity, not pity, but empathy.

"Well, he said I wasn't being cooperative. Said I needed to be shown who's in charge."

"Who said?"

"That doctor," said Claire, "the one with the brown hair, and stubble. You know him?" she carefully avoided mentioning anything about his piercing eyes, or how his touch felt.

"Oh, I know *all* about *him*," said Myst knowingly.

"Anything I need to know?" asked Claire.

"In due time, Claire. In due time. You've got a lot to learn about this place. You should lie down. Come on, I'll walk you to our room."

"*Our* room?"

"Yeah didn't Pam tell you? They put us odd ones together. We're gonna be roomies!" Myst sounded girlish, almost excited.

Claire was relieved that her roommate, if she had to have one, was at least going to be someone she felt like she could talk to. Someone who wouldn't talk down to her.

"Myst," she said nervously, "can you... can you help me tie my gown closed in the back? The strings have

been untied since I got here, it keeps coming open. . . ”

“Did you ask the nurses to tie them?”

“I . . . uh . . . tried, but I couldn’t. Nobody was listening to me about anything else, why would they listen to me about that? And it’s so embarrassing, I didn’t even want to have to talk about it. . . ”

“You’re talking to me about it.”

“Yeah, but you, you’re like . . . a person.”

“Alright let’s get these tied,” said Myst, rising to her feet and leaning in, “here Claire, don’t get up, just turn sideways a little . . . there.”

Claire couldn’t believe it. Someone had just done the one thing for her that she’d been trying to get done for hours.

“Oh Myst, thank you. . . ”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure I’ll end up owing you plenty of favors. Let’s get you down for a quick rest before dinner.”

“You sound more like a doctor or a nurse than the ones here,” laughed Claire as she got up and started to walk, and realized she didn’t need to worry about the gown now.

“*I’ll* be a therapist eventually, if I ever get out of here,” said Myst, “I was in my senior year at State, studying psychology. You know, back in the outside world.”

“Oh. State. That explains everything!” Claire joked.

State University was her own alma mater's in-state rival in basically every sport. Claire had spent four years cracking jokes at the expense of that school and its students, and it was a hard habit to break. It felt good to have something to joke about.

"Oh I see what your deal is," said Myst with a smile, "you're one of those stuck up rich girls from down at the U!"

"Hey, I'm not rich! I got a scholarship! I was a straight-A student once..."

"Oh yeah, I know your type. You're one of those little goody-goody girls. Y'all gave me hell in high school," the playful jests continued as they walked down the hallway. There was no malice in these remarks, just blowing off steam that seemed like it'd been boiling for a while.

"You said *y'all*! I *thought* I heard a southern accent! You're not from around here."

"You got me, I'm not! I'm a southern belle turned rebel. A runaway debutante. And you're a good girl gone *bad*, don't we make a pair," Myst briefly dropped all pretense and let her natural drawl come through.

"That's wild how you can turn that on and off," said Claire.

"You have to. People make judgements, assumptions, when they hear that accent. Expect you to act a certain way," as she said this they arrived in the room. Myst

sat down on one of the beds. "This is my bed here, and that's my dresser there," pointing a toe at the nearest dresser, almost reaching it, Claire thought. "Take any other bed you want."

Claire sat down on the bed directly across from Myst. "Oh," said Myst, "you really want to be that close? You seem like someone that needs your space."

"Normally I am," said Claire, staring at the floor and her own feet, "but here I feel like I might need someone to talk to when I'm trying to go to sleep. Not right now, though, I'm exhausted," she covered herself with the threadbare blanket and turned away from the window which was the room's only source of light as the ceiling lights were already off.

Myst lay down on her own bed, and stared silently up at the ceiling.

"How long have you been here?" asked Claire.

"Oh... about 9 months. Seems like a lot longer. I've been in and out of hospitals since I was 14, and none of them were as much of a shithole as this. Not even the ones that I thought were bad when I was in 'em."

"Why? I mean, why were you in the hospital..."

"Oh, various reasons. Anxiety. Panic attacks. Always thinking people were out to get me. At one point I ran away from home, lived on the street..."

"Is that how you ended up here?"

"Nah," Myst sighed, "I actually got stabilized. They put me on meds that worked, I got back to school, got back to life, went to State, decided to become, you know, a therapist so I could help other people too, and then. . ."

"And then what, Myst?"

"It's a story for another time, Claire, you're not ready to hear it yet."

"I understand," said Claire, "I don't expect you to open up to a stranger on the first day."

"I'm not protecting me, Claire, I'm protecting you."

"Protecting me from what? From who?"

"Don't worry about it Claire, just get some sleep. I've got some business to attend to while you doze."

"Claire, Claire, wake up," said Myst, "it's time to eat. You don't want to miss dinner."

"Oh, already? I was out like a light!"

The cafeteria was a cacophony of clattering plastic trays, clinking silverware, and people milling about. *Just like high school*, thought Claire.

She wondered how she was going to eat with her hands still handcuffed.

The cafeteria worker saw her, and said, "Oh I see we have someone special with us today! Here, honey, we

have this for you,” and handed Claire a paper bag instead of a tray.

Myst, meanwhile, received a tray with the normal evening meal, which in this case was a cube of meatloaf, a scoop of clearly instant mashed potatoes (no gravy available), obviously canned peas-and-carrots, and a dinner roll that had been slightly burned while heating it up.

Both of them were also given little paper cartons of milk.

They sat down at a table where no one else was sitting. While struggling to keep the clanking of her metal handcuffs to a minimum, Claire opened her bag, and found it contained a sandwich wrapped in wax paper, a small plastic bag of potato chips, and a chocolate chip cookie. *Do they think I'm six?*, Claire wondered. The sandwich, when opened, turned out to be bologna and American cheese on white bread.

Myst noticed Claire's expression and said, “Oh it's not you, this is just what they feed everybody that's handcuffed, or if they don't trust you to use utensils, or hold a tray.” It was not encouraging that this situation was common enough for them to have a special menu for it. “Eat,” said Myst, “it'll make you feel better.”

Claire lifted the sandwich with both hands, and took a bite. The bologna smelled and tasted of childhood. There was no mayo or mustard to moisten the dry sandwich bread. The bread stuck to the roof of her

mouth as she chewed. She wasn't sure how much of this she was going to be able to stomach, but the taste of food — any food — reminded her how hungry she was, so she continued to eat.

Feeling a growing thirst, she picked up the little milk carton and contemplated it. It was exactly as she remembered, with the little cartoon cow and everything. She fumbled with it, trying to open it. The handcuffs clinked loudly.

Myst leaned forward, holding up her own carton, demonstrating, and muttered softly. “Pinch the corners. Not the middle, make the seams pop...” as she opened the spout.

Claire mimicked the motion, awkwardly, wrists bound close together. The carton resisted — then, suddenly, the seam gave a soft *crack* and opened.

“Oh!” Claire said, surprised. “It worked.”

“Told you,” Myst said, leaning back with a small, satisfied smile. “You did it.”

“Thanks,” said Claire, who was never more happy to drink 2% milk in her life.

Back in the breakroom, most of the other patients clustered around the TV, which had been set to the HGTV channel by a staff member who took the remote control away with her when she left.

Claire sat further from the TV, not looking at it, and

tried to keep herself calm by reading an issue of *People* magazine from 2019. It wasn't working. She set the magazine down and stared blankly in the general direction of the screen. A couple in a city that wasn't identified, but you could tell was probably San Francisco, toured a renovated Victorian rowhouse that was probably worth more money than Claire would ever make in her life.

Myst sat on the couch next to Claire, legs crossed, dangling her slipper again and silently watching.

"Let's do something," she said, "let's see if any of these still have anything in them," pointing to a shelf of boardgame boxes next to the books.

"I don't feel like playing," muttered Claire.

"Come on, it'll help you relax."

None of the games were playable. The Monopoly box had no money in it. The Chess and Checkers box was missing a bishop, two rooks, six pawns, and only had five red and seven black checkers. The box that appeared to be a deck of cards contained no cards, but a folded up piece of paper. Claire unfolded it, and sighed when she saw someone had written, "Don't forget — you're here forever" on it.

They returned to the TV. The husband was sold on the house but the wife wanted something single-story because she didn't think a house with stairs would be safe for any future child they may have. "If he makes her live in that house," Myst muttered, "I bet she kicks

him down the stairs.”

Later, they sat in their room, staring at the ceiling and talking idly.

With a click, the lights in the room turned off, as if someone down the hall had thrown a switch that turned off the lights in all of the rooms at once.

Claire didn't realize she'd already gotten used to the buzzing lights in this building until the room fell silent. Now all she could hear was the sound of shuffling footsteps out in the hallway, and the occasional clanking of the radiator.

“10 PM,” said Myst. There was no clock in the room, or anywhere else Claire had seen, so she knew Myst actually told the time by these lights going out.

“Lights out, girls,” said a gruff female voice from the door. It was the night shift nurse. Claire could not really make out what she looked like from her silhouette in the door. She sounded like someone who'd been smoking cigarettes for 20 years. She stepped into the room and revealed herself to be a short, stocky, middle aged woman, with short cropped gray hair that had probably once been red, wearing short sleeved scrubs that revealed muscular forearms and tattoos. She wrote something on a clipboard. She looked at Claire, as if sizing her up, and said, “I see you're our new one. I'm Jess, and I'll get you through the night. Let me know if you need anything. Oh yeah, I almost forgot! Give

me your hands. . .”

Jess removed a ring of keys from her pocket, and removed the cuffs from Claire’s wrists. “Thank you,” she nearly sobbed, it felt so good to get them off, even though she knew they’d be back on in the morning.

Jess left as abruptly as she’d entered.

“Myst, am I ever going to get out of here?” Claire asked softly, holding back tears.

“Sure you will. We *all* will.” And Myst drifted off to sleep.

Claire lay awake for hours, staring at the ceiling while Myst slept. Just when it seemed like she was drifting off, Jess barged into the room again, glanced briefly at both patients, and wrote on her clipboard again. “Go to sleep, sweetie,” she said to Claire in a voice that was half whisper, half cough. Myst didn’t wake up. Claire wondered how anyone could sleep in this place.

“Rise and shine, ladies,” said another voice. This time it was Pam again. The new morning sun’s first red rays were slanting in through the window bars. Claire guessed it was about 7:00 AM.

Myst sat up in bed, hair disheveled, eyes blinking to get used to the light, and stared at Pam with the annoyance of the unwillingly awakened. “Let’s get it over with, Nurse,” she grumbled.

“We’ll do your morning routine in a minute, Misty,”

Pam said. Claire could see Myst tense up slightly at the mention of her name. Pam continued, "first, though, I've got a surprise for you, Claire."

Claire, who'd already realized that a "surprise" in this place was unlikely to be anything good, said nothing.

Pam continued "I don't have to put the cuffs back on you today!"

Claire was shocked. *How? What had changed?* She dared not ask. But she had to. She screwed up her courage.

"Am... am I going *home*?" she said meekly.

"Oh baby," Pam said with what sounded almost like genuine sympathy, "that's for the Doctor to figure out. All I know is your hands stay free until further notice."

Claire realized that Myst was looking at her with something that looked like pride, accomplishment. Myst looked away when she realized Claire was staring at her. *Did she have something to do with this?*, Claire wondered.

Pam continued, "I do have one thing I've got to do. Stand up for me, sweetie."

Claire carefully got out of bed. The gown was still tied in the back, but even tied it was more revealing than she was comfortable maneuvering in. She stood nervously, facing Pam.

Pam took a pair of scissors out of her pocket.

"Turn around for me, baby," said Pam.

Claire didn't know what else to do, so she turned around.

"Hold still now, let mama get it with the scissors..."

A snap, a click, and Claire realized that Pam had just used the scissors to cut the strings on the back of the gown. Her hands, thankfully freed, automatically raced back behind her to clasp it shut.

"W... what? Why?" she stammered.

"Doctor's orders, baby," Pam said, "I don't make the rules. All I know is from now on whenever I give you a fresh one to put on, I'm supposed to do this to it."

Claire said nothing. She realized that she'd merely traded one indignity for another. Now instead of her hands being imprisoned by the cuffs, they were going to be constantly busy minding the back of the gown.

"Ok, Misty, it's time to get your medicine," Pam said, "Let's go, sugar." Myst got out of bed and threw on her robe over the pair of blue striped pajamas she'd slept in. She followed Pam out the door like a sullen teenager.

"Claire," Pam called back as they left, "you're free to roam about. You can go to the breakroom for morning TV time, until breakfast."

Breakfast, thought Claire, my hands are free! I'll be able to eat real food, as she stood there next to the bed, her hands still tightly clutching the back of the

gown. Her hands! *They... they're going to expect me to carry a tray now.*

Chapter 4

It Will Take as Long as it Takes

Claire did not dare to leave the room without Myst. She sat on the bed and waited for her to return, staring at her own feet. It was impossible to tell how long she waited, since she had no means of telling the time.

Am I allowed to just sit here like this? Could I just stay here all day if I wanted to?, she asked herself.

She lay back on the bed and tried to relax. Not go back to sleep, just relax. It did not help.

She tried staring out the window. Through the bars it opened onto a bleak courtyard, dead in the winter chill. It gave her no comfort to look at it. There was snow on the ground and ice on the park benches. She

shivered in her thin gown, as if she could feel the cold in spite of the heat from the clanking radiator.

Finally, Myst returned, followed by Pam. Myst had a blank and slightly dazed look on her face, and she looked like she'd been sweating. Claire looked at Pam expectantly, as she assumed it was now her turn for whatever had just happened. Pam recognized her expression, and said, "Oh sweetie, your prescription isn't written yet. I'm sure I'll have something for you tomorrow."

Claire didn't know whether to be relieved or concerned. Maybe they weren't starting her on any new drugs yet because they still weren't sure how long they were going to be keeping her. Maybe it wouldn't be long. On the other hand, whatever red tape was holding up the Doctor from deciding what medications she should be on, was also going to slow down any decisions.

"Enjoy breakfast, darlins'," said Pam as she left the room.

Myst, having seemingly collected herself already, closed the door. She said, "we'll go in a minute, Claire, let me get changed," and took off her robe and threw it on the bed. Before Claire could say anything, Myst had stripped off her pajama top and dropped her pants to the floor, standing there in plain white cotton underwear as casually as if she were alone. *Odd*, thought Claire, *all that pale skin and not a single tattoo. She seems like someone who'd have one.* Claire also thought she saw a band-aid, partially covered by the panties.

“What?” asked Myst, “I hope you aren’t scandalized by seeing me in my unmentionables. We’re roomies, Claire. Had to get those PJs off, they’re really cranking up the steam this morning. And, so you know, my meds make me feel hot sometimes,” as she put the robe back on.

“At least you *have* underwear,” Claire joked, referring to her own state.

“Not done yet!” Myst turned away, did something inside the robe with her hands, and her bra came out and landed on the floor. A shake, and her panties dropped out of the bottom of the robe. Then — Claire would later swear she saw it — Myst picked up both, one at a time, *with her toe*, and flipped them into the laundry hamper in the corner.

“You... walk around like, that?” Claire asked, incredulous that Myst would do this on purpose.

“Cooler this way, airflow!” said Myst as she stepped back into her slippers. Claire was amazed at her unconcern. “Let’s go!”

Myst opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, then turned back to wait for Claire to follow her.

Claire got up slowly, carefully, clasping the back of the gown closed with both hands. One bare foot at a time, she entered the hall. She could feel the draft on the backs of her thighs as a reminder that she wasn’t dressed so much as *wrapped*.

Myst slowed her naturally brisk walk to match Claire’s

pace. She stayed with Claire, keeping an eye on her, watching her pass each turn in the hall, like a sheep dog, or a mother duck watching a duckling waddle across a dangerous road.

They turned a corner, and there was “Old” Bill, fiddling with the attachments on a vacuum cleaner.

“Mornin’, sweetcheeks! Gettin’ used to how they do things around here?” he said, grinning with obvious pleasure.

That man, how can he talk to me like that? Claire thought. *But there’s no one to stop him. Nobody cares.*

“Bill,” Myst said, not even slowing down, “I swear to God, if you hassle her again I’m gonna kick you in the nuts.”

“Like to see you try!” said Bill.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Myst muttered quietly to Claire, slightly bragging. “He’s all talk. Leave him to me if you need to.”

For the first time, Claire felt like someone in this place was genuinely looking out for her. The doctor didn’t care, the nurses didn’t care. But Myst would protect her.

At the food line, Claire carefully picked up a plastic tray with one hand, while continuing to clasp the gown in the back. Down the line she pushed it, as the staff slopped scoopfuls of food onto it. The foods on the menu included scrambled eggs, oatmeal, hashbrowns,

and little breakfast sausages. *Like Liz used to make*, Claire thought to herself. None of it looked particularly gourmet, the eggs were almost certainly powdered, and the sausages were clearly burnt, but Claire was so eager for her first hot meal in over 24 hours that she nodded enthusiastically to each cafeteria worker. Finally, a glass of orange juice.

Claire briefly forgot what was about to happen next. But only briefly. She'd reached the end of the line, now she would have to carry this tray to her table. She dared not let go of the back of the gown even for one second. Slowly, gingerly, she picked up the tray with just her right hand, while her left kept to its place behind her back. The tray was heavy, much heavier than before it had become fully laden with food. *Why did I take so much?*, she asked herself.

She walked even slower, one step at a time, holding the heavy tray as steady as she could. The juice glass rattled. She didn't want to spill it. Everything was plastic, of course, so there would be no broken glass, no shattered dishes. But the embarrassment of spilling it was hard to think about. Everyone would see her. They might not even let her have another tray...

Just then Myst reappeared, sliding in beside her like she'd been watching the whole time. Without asking, she lifted the tray out of Claire's trembling hand.

"Here," she said quietly. "I've got it."

Claire let out a breath. "Thank you," she whispered,

softly and automatically.

Myst set the tray across the table from her own and nodded toward the seat. Claire sat. The powdered eggs were lukewarm and rubbery, but they were the best thing she'd tasted in days.

After breakfast, Claire followed Myst back into the hallway. She was starting to trust her implicitly but cautiously. *She's the only person in this place that seems to care what happens to me. But why? Why does she care?*, Claire wondered.

"What happens now?" Claire asked as she trundled along slowly.

"Shower time," said Myst, "then morning activities."

"What kind of *activities*?"

"Oh you know, art, music, that sorta stuff. It's my favorite time of the day. They let me use crayons!" Claire couldn't tell if Myst was being sarcastic.

"Where are we going now, to our room?" She was slowly mapping the place in her head. A part of her wondered if she could find her room now without being shown.

"Yeah, to get our shower stuff."

In the bathroom shower stall, Claire turned the "hot" knob all the way clockwise, and waited for the water to heat up before adding in the cold. That's how the

showers had worked in her freshman dorm, she thought. You had to really pump the hot at first to get it going.

She waited, and waited. The water became very slightly lukewarm rather than freezing, and stayed that way. Finally, she called over the stall to Myst, “when does it heat up?”

“It doesn’t! You think they trust *us* with actually hot water? Girls would be burning themselves alive, is what they’d tell you if you asked.”

Claire shuddered at the thought of this, and then shuddered again at the thought of that tepid water washing all over her. But she felt filthy after spending one night in this place, so she stepped in against her better judgement. Her whole nervous system recoiled in shock. It was like jumping into a swimming pool in the early morning, or the beach when it’s too cold to swim but you wade in a little anyway. She washed as quickly as possible, noting the smell of the soap. It smelled... medicinal. Clearly designed to fight infection rather than soothe the skin.

“What *is* this stuff?” she called out.

“You know in that movie where the kid says ‘fuck’ and they wash his mouth out with soap? I think it’s that,” said Myst.

Claire pushed the plastic shower curtain aside and reached for her towel. She lifted it to her face and took a small, habitual whiff. It wasn’t mold or mildew — just nothing. A blankness. The absence of the

sweet, homey fragrance she was used to. Even that, she realized, was denied here.

Claire wrapped the towel around herself and paused. “Hey... this thing covers me better than the clothes they give me here. Maybe I can just wear this.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Myst said, tying her robe closed. “I’m not in your same situation now, but I’ve been in it before. You’ll put that gown on, or they’ll put it on you. Ask me how I know.”

Claire did not like the sound of that at all. She also did not think “situation” was a strong enough word for what she was in.

Activity time today involved going to the art room. The walls were decorated with patient drawings, all done in crayon. *Like we’re in kindergarten. One more thing here that is just like that*, she thought.

“Here,” said Myst, pointing at one drawing, “here’s a few of mine!”

Claire was amazed. Myst had somehow managed to create, using only a few crayons, what looked almost like publishable art in a comic book style. Claire didn’t read comics much but her sister Liz certainly did, and these looked exactly like the covers of the older ones, the worn out old yellowed ones from before she was born. The drawings were not, of course, of superheroes. But the style was unmistakable. She stared at a self-

portrait of Myst. *It's beautiful*, Claire thought.

"You look like... what's her name, Superman's girlfriend!" Claire exclaimed.

"Lois Lane," said Myst, "and now if only he'd come and rescue me from this awful predicament."

That's it! That's more like it, Claire thought. She was not in a situation, she was in a predicament.

The next Myst drawing was of two girls that Claire recognized from group therapy, but didn't know by name yet. One looked really young, and had hair that was clearly about the same shade of brown as Claire's, but streaked with orange dye. The other looked about the same age as Claire and Myst and had hair that was so blonde, it was almost white. Myst had captured all this perfectly.

"Oh, them... they're..."

"Nikki and Anna," said Myst, "sometimes the other girls in here pose for me. Those two are ok."

"This was done in the hospital? They're not even dressed like patients," Claire noted. Nikki was wearing baggy jeans and a t-shirt that seemed to have something written on it in Japanese or Chinese or Korean, presumably not actual letters but just the hint of them. Anna looked like she was trying to revive 00's style in a way that was half Catholic-school cheerleader, half punk princess, a look that said "I'm in a band." Myst had conveyed this perfectly.

“Oh, I know,” said Myst, “I pictured them in what they’d be wearing if they weren’t in here.”

“But what about you?” Claire asked, nodding at the self-portrait. Myst had drawn herself in a hospital gown.

“That’s different,” Myst said. “When it’s me, it’s more like... a diary.”

“Myst... all of you seem to have such nice hair, how do you keep it up? They only give you one hairbrush and that funny smelling shampoo...”

“Oh, yeah. Pam must’ve forgotten to tell you. There’s a salon in here. One of the *very* few little perks of the outside world. They also do toes!” said Myst, directing attention to her clipped and painted nails showing out of the end of her open-toed slipper.

That’s odd, thought Claire, they make us dress so horrible but they let us keep our hair and nails and makeup going like it’s the outside world? For what? For who?!

“Ladies,” a nurse’s assistant announced, “quit dawdling and grab some crayons!”

Claire couldn’t think of anything to draw on her piece of white paper. She just doodled little hearts and flowers, to pass the time.

After they’d been drawing for a while, Myst nudged Claire gently and said, “Hey Claire! This one is me, done like Nikki and Anna.”

It was a drawing, all in black crayon, of Myst sitting

alone on a stoop in front of a brick building. Almost alone — she was accompanied by a large dog, probably a pit bull. Myst was wearing a black camisole, black miniskirt, black fishnet stockings on her white legs, and black combat boots. Her eyes looked intense. A single cross, her only jewelry, hung on a pendant around her neck.

“Is that your dog?”

“Yeah, that’s Shadow. We met on the street, when I ran away. He guarded me at night while I was sleeping in storefront doorways and hidden under park-benches. He’s still down south with my parents, I was always gonna bring him to live with me when I could manage to find a bigger place, but well, *this* happened. He’s 10 years old now. Hopefully I’ll get out of here while there’s still a couple of years left with him.”

“Oh, Myst,” Claire’s heart for the first time felt a crack for Myst, saw her newfound guardian as someone who experienced pain and loss, “I’m so sorry, I can tell you miss him. My sister, Liz, had an old dog, Biscuit, that lived to be 13! I miss that old beagle, still. . .” Claire cried a little, then cheered up to ask, “and is *that* what you wore when you were on the street?”

“Oh hell no! That’s how I’m gonna look when I get outta here!”

At that moment, Pam poked her head into the door. “Claire, sweetie, come with me.”

“I’m going home!” Claire whispered to Myst, hopefully.

As she followed Pam out the door, Claire repeated, “I’m going home?” forlornly.

“Oh darlin’ it’s none of my business when they send you home! But you have a phone call.”

Pam escorted Claire to the nurse’s station, and handed her a corded desk telephone receiver. Claire had semi-expected a phone in a conference room, like the ones at work. Somewhere you could close the door! Or at least a desk or table, or a chair to sit on. No, she was going to have to stand at the nurse’s station in the common area, one hand holding the phone headset to her ear, the other holding her gown closed in the back.

I need to stop being surprised about stuff like this, she thought.

It was Liz!

“Liz! Where have you been? Why did you take so long to call me? I’ve been in here all night, nobody will tell me anything, I don’t know why I’m here, I don’t know how long I’m going to be here...”

“Claire,” said the voice on the other end, “I called as soon as I found out! Do you have any idea how glad I am to hear your voice, to hear that you’re ok?”

“Please Liz, tell them I don’t belong here! Tell them I can go home...”

“Claire, of course I’ve told them that. But there’s a lot of red tape for them to go through. I can’t get

any answers either, other than that you're still being evaluated."

"Liz, I need answers!"

"Claire, you'll be the first to know when I have any. Until then I just need you to get plenty of rest, follow your Doctor's instructions, and don't be afraid, ok? I need you to do that for me. Can you do that?"

"Oh... Liz...", Claire was starting to break down. Tears were welling in her eyes.

"Claire, promise me. Promise you're going to rest! For me."

"Alright," said Claire, briefly collecting herself, "for you."

"Ok, sweetie, I'll be in there to visit you as soon as they'll let me!"

"Ok."

"Goodbye, Claire."

"Goodbye, Liz."

As soon as she hung the phone up, Claire began crying again, "I want to go home!" choking on her tears.

Pam said, "Claire, darlin, let's get you to your room and let you get some rest. You should just sleep in the rest of the mornin'"

"Pam! Please! Let me go! Let me out of here, I want to go home!" Claire sobbed.

“Boys!” Pam called. Two absurdly muscular male orderlies appeared on cue. Claire wasn’t even sure if it was the same two she’d seen the previous day.

“Escort this young lady to room 217,” said Pam in a businesslike voice, “and make sure she arrives safe and doesn’t get lost.”

“Claire,” Pam said very softly, almost whispering, “if you don’t go with these gentlemen, they’re big enough to pick you up and carry you there. I’m just trying to spare you the trouble.”

Too distraught to respond to Pam, Claire silently started walking in the general direction the orderlies were directing her. She did not say a single word to the men leading her. She walked the hallway dejectedly, one bare foot at a time, not noting any passers by. They were almost at her room. They were at the threshold of her room, when she heard footsteps approaching. Purposeful, confident footsteps that somehow sounded almost like someone walking on a hard floor instead of this old threadbare carpet.

“Claire?” said a voice. It was a voice she knew, but not one she expected to hear, or particularly wanted to hear. It was *him*, the Doctor. The man who actually decided if she stayed or if she went. She had to compose herself. She had to look like someone who did not need to be here. *Has he already seen me crying? Is it too late?* Her stomach dropped. If he’d seen her crying, it was over. Nobody listens to crying girls. She snapped to attention, stood straight and faced him, both hands

clasped together behind her at the back of her gown, her toes pointing inward.

“Y-yes,” she answered as calmly as possible. For a heartbeat she thought he might say something that would help. Something that would make sense of all this.

“I see you are under quite a bit of stress. Don’t worry, Claire, I’m going to make sure you are well *accommodated* here. Tomorrow we’ll start a new course of medications for you, based on our observations of what you need,” he scratched something on a clipboard with his pen. He was wearing the bluest shirt she’d ever seen, Claire noticed, under his white labcoat.

What I need is to not be here, she thought, but did not say.

“Be gentle with this one, gentlemen,” he said to the orderlies, “she seems fragile.”

The instant all of the others had gone, Claire threw herself down on her bed, face down, and buried her face in her hands.

“What’s eatin’ you, sugar-britches? Or should I say, lack thereof. . . ,” said a male voice. It was Bill, peeking in the open door. No one had thought to close it. To her horror she remembered. She was lying face down on the bed, with her hands at her face. Her mind raced. *The door! My gown! Everyone can see my. . . Oh God. . . everyone can see me like this!*, unable to even say to herself what she was really thinking.

Without acknowledging Bill at all, she got up out of bed, pulled up the covers, got back in bed, pulled the sheet all the way up over her face, and resumed crying. With no one to shush her, no one to calm her down, nothing left to lose, she sobbed uncontrollably. She turned over again and buried her face in the pillow to muffle the screams. She'd lost whatever faint hope she was still clinging to, of a quick and easy end to all this. This was going to take as long as it was going to take. And nobody was ever going to tell her anything.

She drifted off to an uneasy sleep, until she was awakened by Pam just before lunch.

Staring at her Salisbury steak, Claire caught herself thinking that she'd been in the hospital a very long time, before it occurred to her she'd actually been there almost exactly *one* day. She didn't bother mentioning this to Myst.

Chapter 5

Poor Little Thing

Afternoon was, again, time for group therapy. Claire and Myst sat with the other residents of their ward, while Laura called on each patient in turn.

She turned to the youngest one, who looked to be only about 18. She was wearing a drab gray robe over a hospital gown covered with dull, muted purple polka dots. She had hospital-issue socks on her feet, the color of brown mud. Her brown hair was streaked with orange highlights that looked like she'd done them herself in a dorm-room sink. She looked anxious, agitated.

“Nicollette,” said Laura, “why don’t you tell us how you are doing?”

“It’s Nikki,” the girl corrected. “And I don’t know why I need to be here. You know I’m only here because I

keep fainting, and losing my balance and falling down. I have medical problems, I don't have a mental illness. Why would I need *this*?"

Laura ignored the very reasonable question.

"Ladies," she addressed the crowd not the individual, "can anyone name the problem with Nicollette's outburst just now?"

A voice said, "it's too much like *right*."

Everyone turned to see who said it. It was a girl with very light bleach blonde hair, wearing striped pajamas and slippers.

"We do not need that kind of attitude, Anna," snapped Laura.

Claire recognized both Nikki and Anna from Myst's drawings. Claire thought that Anna looked like a blonde version of Myst. And she had the same protective streak, the willingness to go to bat for someone else, like she just did for Nikki. *Oh poor Nikki! So young to be trapped in this place, for what sounds like even less of a reason than mine*, Claire thought.

Beside her, Myst uncrossed and re-crossed her legs, fidgeting the way she always did when Laura had the floor. One slipper had already escaped; she flicked the other into the air, caught it, and slid it back on. Claire was learning to read her: the more Laura talked, the less still Myst's feet got. Laura shot her a warning glance, then resumed.

“How about you next, Claire,” said Laura as if she could tell Claire was thinking about something. “You’ve been here for 24 hours, Claire, have you had time to think about your situation?”

Claire just stared at Laura, not sure what to say.

“Claire, we can’t help you if you don’t open up. What’s bothering you?”

“Just...,” Claire really wanted to repeat everything she’d been telling everyone since the previous afternoon, but she realized it would do her no good.

“I get it. Too uncomfortable to open up. Too scary. We’ve got something to work on! Maybe, today, start with something positive. What are you *thankful* for?”

“I... uh...,” Claire tried to think of something good and the only thing she could think of was how Myst treated her, but she also did not want to call Myst out in a way that would single Myst out for more trouble. “I’m thankful for my fellow patients. When I got here I felt so alone...”

She couldn’t go on. She hung her head, trying not to cry.

Myst slouched deeper in her chair, her bare foot now propped on her knee. The robe slipped off one shoulder. She didn’t bother to fix it. She glowered at Laura.

A patient knelt beside Claire before she even realized the woman had gotten out of her own chair. “You’re not alone,” she said, holding Claire’s hand. “I’ve *been*

you. I know what this is like.” The woman did, indeed, look very much like Claire, or what Claire imagined herself looking like in about five years. “I’m Nancy. I’ve been here forever. You can talk to me any time you want.”

“You can also talk to me,” said a pale, freckled woman who looked to be in her thirties — and also looking like she hadn’t slept in a week. “Marija. *Doctor* Marija.”

“You’re a *doctor*? Here?”

“No, sweetie. I’m a pediatrician. I’m a patient here.”

Claire wondered *how* such a person ended up a patient here. She imagined Anna saying it was because Marija “cared too much.”

“*Pobrecita!*” said another woman leaning in, about the same age as Marija, “I’m Elena. If there’s anything I can do. . .”

“Pobre— what?”

Elena said softly, almost whispering, “it means *poor little thing*.”

Claire felt very accurately labeled.

“Ladies! Return to your seats! The welcome wagon can operate in your free time, we have others to get to.”

Myst shifted again, now sitting sideways with both legs draped over the arm of her chair, one foot kicking idly at the air, the robe barely hanging on. *It’s a*

performance, Claire realized, *every inch of it, and it's aimed at Laura.*

"Misty! Can you *please* sit up properly? We are trying to have a meeting here!"

Claire glanced at Myst as she straightened. They exchanged a quick grin. Claire nearly laughed.

And then — a shift came over the room.

As she looked at Myst, she saw her as she'd been in the crayon drawing: dressed all in black, confident, beautiful. The camisole, the miniskirt, the fishnets, the polished boots. The silver cross around her neck catching the fluorescent light.

Claire looked around the room.

Her eyes landed on Nikki — and for a moment she couldn't remember the hospital girl she'd seen a minute ago. That version was gone. In her place sat the Nikki from Myst's sketchbook. Claire blinked. The hospital version didn't return. Myst's version was the real one.

Anna, too — she looked like she'd stepped out of a video, ready to record a tutorial on early-00s style.

"Myst," Claire whispered, "you need to draw them too." She gestured toward Nancy, Elena, and Marija.

It was the second morning Claire had awakened in the hospital, after another nearly sleepless night.

As on the previous day, Pam came in the morning to

collect Myst and take her away for her medications. Once again, Myst returned looking dazed and sweaty. *Every day here is going to be the same as yesterday*, Claire thought.

“Claire,” said Pam, “it’s your turn sweetie.”

“I’ll be right here when you get back, *sweetie*,” said Myst, with a sarcastic emphasis on the final word that made Claire grin. Pam gave Myst a sideways glance and then turned to go.

Claire followed Pam out the door. Pam led her down the hallway, through the common area, past the nurses’ station, and to the door that separated this ward from the rest of the hospital. Pam swiped her ID and the door opened. Claire followed her through it back into the world she’d seen on her first day here.

Gone was the worn out old carpet, replaced by cold tile. Gone were the institutional cinder-block walls, replaced by ancient, medieval stone and brick. She had returned to the part of the hospital that felt like an old castle, or monastery. This was recognizably the section where the Doctor had conducted her exam when she arrived. This was, apparently, where everything “medical” happened. Including, it seemed, the medications she was about to receive.

Pam led her into one of the small exam rooms off of the hallway, and closed the door behind them. The door had a keycard reader on the inside of the room. Claire knew what this meant — she would not be able

to leave this room without Pam.

On a table in the room was a large envelope, the kind that offices use. On it was a sticker that read, “Special Projects / Patient #170422 / Class P-1 / Specification B.” Claire did not know what any of this meant. It also contained a series of letters and numbers she couldn’t understand at all, and a barcode.

Pam opened it. First she took out a medical bracelet.

“Here sweetie, let’s get this on you. This one has your new information on it.”

Claire had been wearing the same plastic patient’s bracelet since the ambulance, that had her name, DOB, blood type, etc., on it. Pam took out a pair of scissors and snipped it off, it fell to the floor. She placed the new bracelet on Claire’s wrist with a snap.

Claire looked at the label. It had no name, nothing recognizable, just the same cryptic information as was printed on the envelope’s sticker.

“But,” she dared, “it doesn’t have my name on it.”

“Oh sweetie, you’re in our system now! We all know who you are. Now let’s get started. Sit on the table, please, Claire. I’m gonna start by checking your vitals.”

Claire sat on the table. Pam took out a stethoscope, and placed its diaphragm over Claire’s heart, listened for a few seconds...

“Breathe for me, baby,” Claire obeyed.

Pam moved the scope around to Claire's back, and placed the cold metal on her bare skin where the gown was open. Claire flinched.

"It's ok sweetie, now give me another deep breath... good. Now let's get your blood pressure..."

She placed a blood pressure cuff on Claire's arm, and inflated it. Claire always hated this part of a doctor visit. She was always afraid the test was going to show a high blood pressure, resulting in even more tests to investigate it. She held her breath, tried to calm herself as much as possible. She tried to clear her mind, rid herself of anxiety. She was never sure it was going to work.

Pam stopped to write some numbers down on a clipboard. She didn't tell Claire what the numbers were or what they meant.

Pam then took out a thermometer, and laid it on the table. A glass thermometer, the kind Claire had only seen in pictures. She opened a jar of something greasy.

Is that lube?!, Claire wondered. *What is going on? What is she doing?*

Pam began to rub the greasy substance *onto the thermometer*.

"Pam...", Claire mustered up all of her courage to ask, "what are you doing?"

"Oh honey," Pam said, "I'm gonna have to explain. You young'uns don't know about these things anymore.

This is a *rectal* thermometer.”

Oh God oh God does that mean...

“A *rectal* thermometer?” her voice was shaking.

“Yes, sweetie, and I’m going to need you to stand up and turn around. It doesn’t go in your mouth, it goes...”

Oh no oh no don’t say it...

“... in your bottom. Now get up and turn around for me.”

Claire sat motionless, frozen. This was a new line. A new threshold. She’d been through a lot, but now, now this woman was going to insert this thing into... she could not even make herself think it! The closest thing she could say was...

“Back there?!!” Claire said in a loud whisper, as if she was ashamed someone would hear it.

“Yes, Claire, back there. In your rectum.”

“W-why? Don’t you have a normal thermometer? Don’t you...,” she was nearly in tears yet again.

“Doctor’s Orders, baby,” said Pam with resignation, “I don’t decide these things. Now quit stalling. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way.”

“What’s the hard way?”

“I call the boys in and they hold you down while I do this.”

The only thing that could possibly make this worse would be having multiple people witness it. Claire thought she was going to faint, but she got up, turned around, and faced the exam table, resting her hands on it.

“Bend over forward, sweetie, put your elbows down on the table.”

Claire obeyed.

“Now I’m gonna grease you up a little bit too,” said Pam. She parted Claire’s cheeks and rubbed a small amount of lube on her, back there.

This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening

“Relax, baby, while the thermometer goes in,” said Pam as she slid the thermometer in.

Claire’s mind was blank. This was an unimaginable occurrence, a fear that had been lurking in her subconscious, never to be vocalized. And now, here it was. It was real, and there was nothing she could do. *It* was in her. It was in her *back there*, where nothing was ever supposed to go. It was too much to be real, so for a moment at least, it wasn’t. Nothing was.

“That’s right, honey, hold still for me. You’re being such a good girl,” Pam reassured her. “Now I just have to hold this in for a couple of minutes...”

Claire said nothing. Claire *could* say nothing. She didn’t really hear Pam. She wasn’t really there.

Silence. For a merciful moment, all was silence.

Then it was out. Claire would swear she heard it make a sound when it came out of her.

Suddenly she could breathe. She was back in the room, and capable of speech again.

“C-can I go now?”

“No sweetie, now that I took your vitals, it’s time for your medicine.”

Claire turned her head to look at Pam. Pam opened another jar, and took something out of it. The pill, if it was a pill, looked impossibly large. *How can I swallow that?* Claire thought. *I can’t possibly, it’s too big I’ll choke I’ll...*

Her thought stopped. What if it wasn’t a pill?

“Lean over the table again, baby,” said Pam warmly, “this is a suppository!”

What Claire’s mind had stopped short of thinking, was yet again the case. She leaned her head forward, tried to forget what she’d just seen.

“Here it comes,” said Pam, as she slowly inserted the suppository. It was every bit as big as it had looked. Claire winced, and made a very slight utterance, the softest detectable squeak.

“Now this first one is for anxiety. It’ll calm you down, make you feel relaxed, make you not so jumpy and on-edge all the time...,” Pam said as she held it in place with her finger until it dissolved. It was gone.

Unlike the thermometer, it was never going to come back out. It had been absorbed by her body.

“Ok I’ll give you a second before the next one, let that one sink in,” said Pam.

Claire said nothing.

“Ok, baby, here comes the second one. This one is an anti-depressant, to improve your mood.”

But I’m not...

Before Claire could finish the thought, the suppository was in her, and she could not think about anything at all until it too was gone, swallowed up. Finally, it was all dissolved. Claire remained in position, breathing, having difficulty believing that everything that had just happened was real.

Eventually she asked, with exhaustion, “is that all?”

“Yes, that was the last one. For today. But I’m gonna have to ask you: you haven’t had a bowel movement yet in the hospital, have you?”

Claire was too mortified to say anything. This was not a topic she was willing to discuss, not even now.

“I didn’t think so. From now on I need you to tell me whenever you do, so I can put it down in your chart. Otherwise we may have to do something about it.”

Oh no. Oh no no no no..., thought Claire, Pam had said “from now on.” Claire knew what that meant. This was now a routine. This was going to be a daily occurrence.

This thought was too much to entertain. Claire did not entertain it.

Myst was waiting in the bedroom for Claire's return, sitting on the bed. Claire walked in the door, threw herself down on the bed next to Myst, buried her face in Myst's shoulder, and cried.

"Oh Myst... I can't... I can't even talk about it... it was too..."

"Shh...", said Myst, softly stroking Claire's hair, "don't talk, Claire Bear. It'll all be ok."

Chapter 6

That's How They Get You

Claire had now been in the hospital for one week. Every day for the past five days, Pam had escorted Claire into the examination room, and performed the unthinkable. The unspeakable. Claire did not talk while it was happening, and she did not talk about it after it was over either. She preferred to think of it as little as possible. This proved surprisingly difficult. She found she could be in the middle of talking or thinking about something else, and all of a sudden find herself remembering... *that*. It had happened the day before, it had happened this morning, and it was going to happen again tomorrow. The thought of it was always just out of view, hanging out in the periphery of her mind.

She had just returned to the room, where Myst welcomed her back with a silent hug, as if Myst somehow knew that something unspeakable had just happened.

"Myst," Claire asked, "what exactly happens when they take *you* to get your daily meds? Like, how do they give them to you?"

Myst looked like someone had just asked her a question she'd been dreading having to answer, but knew it was coming eventually.

"Well, Pam takes me over there to the exam room, and gives me a shot, here. . . "

Myst pulled up her robe, and pulled down her panties, to show a band-aid on her right butt-cheek.

"Oh. . . ," Claire was shocked, not by Myst's casual self-exposure (she was used to that by now), but by what this meant. Myst was not getting the same treatment she was. Myst was not getting drugs by suppository, and probably also wasn't getting rectal temperatures either. None of this made sense to Claire.

"That is not what they do to me," she explained.

"I didn't think so," said Myst, "they have several different ways of *getting* to you here, and needles are mine. Claire, have you ever wondered why I don't have any tattoos?"

"No I never thought about it," Claire lied out of politeness.

"Oh, come on! I look like someone who *should* have tats,

and yet I don't. You wanna know why?" Myst's eyes widened, as she sat back down, and began dangling her slipper the way she always did.

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid of needles. Totally freaked out. Tattoo needles, shot needles, blood tests, IVs, doesn't matter. When I first got here to this hospital, every time they said they were going to inject me with something, I ran *screaming*. They used to have to send the goons after me to catch me and hold me down while they injected me. I used to fight them, hard. They'd always win, but I gave as good as I got!"

"But why? I mean, why do they *do* that to you? Don't they have pills?"

"Well, yeah. The meds I'm on, I always was on pills before I got here. They do this on purpose, *because* they know I hate it. That's what they do here, Claire."

"Oh, no..."

"That's right. That's what this place does. That's what being a *special project patient* means. They figure out, or guess, what's the thing that really drives you up the wall, and then they do it to you. Every day."

"Why? Why would they do that? Who does that help?"

"They're not trying to help us, Claire, they're trying to control us, and use us, and play with us. We're toys. Playthings."

"Oh God," Claire muttered, barely able to think the thought.

"Now let me guess what they're doing to get to you. Based on the dress code they already imposed on you — what with the gown and all — I'm gonna guess they give you suppositories. Rectal temps. You know, stuff that goes in your *butt*."

"Oh Myst, don't talk about it please, I don't want to think about it," Claire was shaking.

"That's kind of the point, though. They know you don't want to think about it. They like taking all the things you'd rather not think about, and shoving them in your face. Or, in your case, shoving them someplace else."

"But... how did they know?"

"I'm sure they've got a bunch of theories that pseudo-scientifically explain it."

"And *you* knew, Myst, how did *you* know?"

"Oh Claire... let me count the ways," Myst continued, excited. Claire could tell Myst was excited because her foot was twitching faster. "Well let's see... the first day you got here, the first time I saw you, when you sat down? You... you didn't sit all the way back. It was like, you didn't even want the *chair* touching your — touching you back there."

"I... didn't notice myself doing that."

"Most people *don't* notice that kind of thing. You have

to train yourself to see it. And here's more — whenever Pam walks in to take you, you go stiff as a board — not like you're scared, even though you are — but more like you're embarrassed. And when the Doctor...

"Don't talk about him!" Claire interjected.

"And the gown? It bothers you *way* more than it would most people. Most people, yeah, they would think it was embarrassing. Who wouldn't? I did, when I had to wear one, when I first got here. But that's most people, just at first. And then they'd think it was funny. And then... they'd get used to it and not even notice it. But not you."

"Oh... well, I..."

"And every time you come back from the exam room?"

Claire *had* started to try to say something, but Myst was talking fast, like Claire'd had a split second in which to speak, and she missed it.

"You — oh sorry — you, uh...mmm..." Myst twirled her finger in circles, as if trying to restart a car that had run off the road, "You — you don't talk! And you don't look at anybody in the eyes, and you walk different. You walk like somebody who's trying not to think about their own body. And that's why you're in the gown, Claire. This place only keeps people in gowns who really don't want to be in them. I've seen it all before."

"Really?"

“There’s parts of you that you don’t want anyone to see, or know about, and you don’t even want to think about. Maybe you don’t even know you’re thinking about it, right now, most of the time. But it’s always at the back of your mind, nagging at you, and you don’t even know how hard you’re working to keep it out of your conscious mind. The, uhm, tax you’re paying. I can see it, and so can they.”

“You’re right. I’m scared, Myst! What does all that mean?” Claire asked.

“It means they know. They’ve found it. They’ve found the one thing you’d want more than anything to keep hidden from them, and engineered it *just so*, so you can’t ever forget it, because it’s peeking out of the back of your gown every time you stand up!”

Claire was silent for a minute, then spoke softly but firmly, “Please do not mention this gown.”

It was afternoon socialization time. Most of the patients were watching TV. Claire was not interested, and sat on a couch away from everyone else, not even facing the TV. Instead she was watching a curious gathering off in its own corner of the commons room.

Nikki was sitting in an armchair in the corner. A nurse escorted a group of three or four strangers — outsiders — people dressed in street clothes! — towards her. It was the first time in a week that Claire had seen people that were not dressed either as patients, or nurses, or . . .

Doctors.

The Doctor! That man appeared in her imagination again. She was aware that he was planning to examine her again soon. She did not want to think about it. She pushed him out and concentrated on the strangers. *Visitors!* she thought, *Nikki's friends came to see her!*

The visitors were two girls and two guys, all of whom looked like college students. They looked pretty much like the sort of people you would imagine Nikki to hang out with. One of the girls had short hair that was dyed blue. She was somewhat heavysset, and was wearing some kind of Dungeons and Dragons t-shirt. The other girl was thin, angular, tan with very black hair, and looked like she was dressed to go hiking. Claire could not guess her exact ethnicity. She looked very intelligent. She hugged Nikki. Claire could hear female voices expressing sympathy.

And then there were the guys. One of them was short, shorter than the girls, with red hair and beard. He looked like a little leprechaun, Claire thought. He was dressed in some kind of video game t-shirt, and jeans that didn't fit very well. The other guy was lanky, tall but slouching, dark haired, bearded. Wearing a flannel shirt that looked like it had seen better days, some kind of heavy metal t-shirt that Claire couldn't tell if it had words on it or just some kind of design made out of lightning and dead branches, jeans the color of the green beans that they served in the cafeteria at the hospital, and skateboarder shoes that appeared on the

very point of falling apart. He was wearing a beanie. Claire wondered if he wore it indoors because he was already going bald.

They talked to Nikki for a while, but Claire couldn't understand their conversation. She could hear Nikki's tone, she could tell Nikki was complaining, venting. *And why shouldn't she?*, Claire thought, *she'd been stuck here for reasons even more stupid than me.* Gradually the taller guy turned away from the group, apparently tired of listening to Nikki rant. He walked away from them. He started walking...

Oh God no!, thought Claire, *he's coming this way*

She sat perfectly still, perfectly straight, and stared at the floor, and at her two bare feet. She tried to will the boy away, with all of her mental concentration. *Go somewhere else! Anywhere else! Just don't...*

It was too late. The boy was now sitting at the extreme end of the couch. The same couch Claire was sitting on. He was looking at her. She couldn't look back. She couldn't breathe.

How can I talk to him, when I'm... like this, she looked at the thin blue fabric of her gown, *he can see what I'm wearing. How does he possibly think I'd want to talk? Here, now, when I'm...*

He interrupted her thoughts with, "You must be Claire. Nikki said they had a new girl here named Claire."

Claire said nothing. She continued to stare at her feet.

"You seem cool," continued the guy, "I'm Jacob. But my friends call me *The Gent*" (or at least that's what it sounded like he said)

You're not being very gentlemanly, Claire wanted to say, but did not.

After an awkward silence, "you know like the guitar sound? Djent, djent, djent..." he continued, playing air guitar.

Further silence. Claire couldn't even look at him, but she assumed he was looking her all over. He was looking at her blue hospital gown, at her hands folded on her lap, at her bare knees, at her bare feet. She tried to dig her bare toes into the carpet to hide them. It didn't work. The carpet was as threadbare as the couch.

At that exact moment, Myst walked over. "Uh. I leave you alone for five minutes, and *this* happens?" she said to Claire, who continued to say nothing.

Myst turned to The Gent, and said, "be careful trying to pick up chicks in an insane asylum! some of us are a little *crazy!*"

The young man was taken aback, "uhm... uh... we were just talking..."

"No," Myst said with a finality like Claire had never heard before.

The boy left without saying anything, and went back to join Nikki. Claire saw the blue-haired girl give him a very disappointed look, and the taller girl spoke to him.

She could not hear her but her face looked displeased. Even Nikki looked annoyed at him. The leprechaun guy just sort of looked awkward.

"Thank you," muttered Claire, turning her attention to Myst.

"Claire Bear," said Myst, "you can say *no* to people."

"I wanted to, I couldn't. I couldn't talk to him or even look at him, not even to tell him to go away," Claire explained.

"I know," said Myst with sympathy, "it's hard. That's why I'm here to say it for you, for now, but you're going to need to learn."

"I don't know if I can."

"Claire, you need to, because there's people here at this hospital that do *not* have your best interests in mind."

"Like who, Pam? How can I say no to *her*?"

"No no. Pam is nothing. Pam's just doing her job. Have you had your weekly checkup with the Doctor yet?"

"No," Claire shuddered. She did not want to think about the Doctor examining her again. He made her extremely edgy. "It's... tomorrow."

"Well," said Myst with the same tone of reluctant sharing as she'd used that morning, "I know a few things about him that I need to tell you."

"I don't like talking about him. He's the reason I'm

stuck here! And being around him makes me so... well, like what you just saw — helpless! I don't even like thinking about him!"

"You might not like thinking about him, Claire, but I expect that he's thinking about *you*!"

"Oh Myst please don't be talking in circles like that, at a time like this! Please just tell me what I'm supposed to be worried about!"

"Ok. Our Doctor — the one that's in charge of all the patients on this floor... Have you noticed that all of the women in here, are mostly young? Mostly hot? Mostly don't even need to be here, or just barely? It's not exactly a cross-section of all the types of women who belong in a mental hospital!"

"I... yes, now that you mention it. I figured that was just because, you know, this was the low-security wing or something."

"Well, it is, actually, it's mostly full of girls like us — girls that don't need to be here. As far as the official hospital is concerned, this is just where they place us. As far as *he's* concerned, this place is his collection. His menagerie. Where he keeps his *pretty things*..."

"Oh...", Claire did not like the sound of any of this, at all.

"And then there's you and me. Most of the women here are decorations, flowers in his garden. You and me, we're his *special project*. He has *plans* for us."

“Oh God! I don’t believe it! Myst, the man is cruel, yes, but he’s a Doctor! He’s doing his job...”

“Believe it, Claire! He *wants* you, and that’s why you’re still here!”

“How... how do you know?”

“Because he’s already *got* me!”

“What?!”

“Claire, the Doctor is, I’m not sure what the word is. My boyfriend? No that’s too innocent. Lover? No, that makes it sound like fun. Sugar-daddy? That’s a lot closer, only even the sugar here isn’t very sweet.”

Claire stared at Myst, not sure if she could believe what she was hearing.

Myst continued, “I could, perhaps accurately, also use words like abuser, enslaver, except... those don’t convey the part I’m playing voluntarily.”

Claire stammered, “V-voluntarily? You *want* to do this?”

Myst paused for a moment, as if briefly stung by an accusation, and then continued in a dry, clinical manner. “I don’t *want* to do this Claire. I *need* to do this. He has me anyway. He doesn’t have to let me go. He can do whatever he wants. At least, this way, I get a little in return for giving him something he can’t get any other way.”

Claire was terrified. It had sunk in. Myst wasn’t

lying, wasn't exaggerating, wasn't just a crazy person imagining things. This was *real*.

"And what is that? What do you *give* him?"

Myst's voice lowered, "Two things. One, I give him *willing participation*. He can't *force* me to pretend I'm doing this of my own free will! Two, I give him the one thing he can't get from anyone else here — *domination*."

Claire was confused again, just when she thought she understood Myst, she was thrown for another loop. "Domination?"

"Yes, Claire. He needs me to be the only woman that can take charge of him. All day long he gets off on being in charge of all the girls in here, but the thing only I can give him is to make *him* feel small. Make him feel degraded. Make him feel like the piece of absolute human garbage that he is..."

"You mean, like, whips and chains and stuff?" Claire's knowledge of this area of human sexuality was limited mainly to sex store billboards along the freeway, and a couple of steamy novels, which she found herself unable to finish reading for how awkward they made her feel.

"Yes, sometimes," said Myst. "I'm not proud of it. Before I got locked up in here, I was involved with kinky people who did it right. There's a *community*, Claire, and rules. Rules that protect you. Rules that keep everyone safe. I learned those rules! Those rules set me free. There's no rules in here, other than what

I'm able to get him to agree to by sheer force of will. I'm all alone, there's no one here to protect me..." Myst trailed off, she sounded like she was about to cry herself, "... so I have to protect myself!"

"Oh God! Oh Myst, I'm sorry I doubted you!" Claire pleaded, "I believe you! I believe you!" she said, hugging Myst, this time as the comforter. "But what's in it for you? What could you possibly have to gain?"

"Well," Myst continued after another pause, "it means I get some semblance of control over times, places, what I have to do. It also means I have a lot more autonomy in this hospital than I would otherwise. You notice how even though I'm a special project, I get to dress how I want? I mean, a robe with a *belt*? Have you ever heard of a mental hospital, prison, rehab, halfway house, or anything, where they let you have belts? That alone should have given me away as not quite a normal patient."

"I guess? I mean, I did notice that you're not dressed like I am," Claire said, contemplating her own gown again.

"That's one of the few advantages of my... situation. But mostly, I use it to help others."

"Others?"

"Like, when you got your zip ties taken off sooner than expected, remember?"

Claire thought for a second. "Oh Myst! That was you!

You did that?! How?" *Myst has been protecting me since the day I got here, before I even really knew her!*, Claire thought.

"You don't want the details, Claire, believe me!"

Claire did not, in fact, want the *details*. "So why... again... are you telling me this?"

"Because if you're here, he's got his eye on *you* too. I'm not enough for him, apparently. He wants you, too!"

This was, of course, exactly what Claire did not want to hear. She started crying, silently. "What do you think he wants from me, specifically?" she dared to ask. She did not want to think about what this man and Myst were doing, or the idea of her being expected to do any of it.

"I don't know," said Myst, returning to her factual, clinical voice, "but it must be completely different from what he gets from me. From me, he gets a deal. A compromise. He gets transactions. It's all tit for tat — except I'm all tits and no tats, and not even too much of that..." Myst grinned and gesticulated in the direction of her chest, her modest cleavage visible inside the robe, attempting to inject humor into what she was about to have to say. "If I had to guess, I'd guess he expects your complete and total *submission*. He wants you to surrender to him. He thinks he can bend you."

"Oh... Myst I'm scared. What am I going to do?"

"Well, you could fight. Push back. Kick. Scream. Bite! There'll be consequences, but you'll survive. The fact that I'm ok, after the fights I put up when I first got here, is proof of that."

"Myst," Claire said tearfully, "I'm not you! I don't think I can do that."

"I know, I know, Claire Bear. Here's what I suggest instead, and I think you're going to do it anyway without me telling you: exactly what I saw just now with stupid-boy."

"Huh? I didn't do anything."

"That's right. That's it exactly. You went stiff as a board. You showed no sign of liking him. You refused to entertain him. You made no effort at all to recognize him, his presence, you gave him no power over you!"

"That's not how it felt!"

"That's what I saw! You held your own, in the only way you know how. And that's what I need you to do with the Doctor. Don't give him *anything*. Don't pretend to like him. Don't pretend you're comfortable with him. Don't let him ever think he's winning you over."

"Will that... work?"

"I don't know, but it's what we've got. You just hold your ground, like I saw you do just now, until I can figure out how to get you out of this shithole."

Chapter 7

A Maze of Twisty Little Passages

It was Tuesday. *Towel Tuesday*, Claire said to herself, looking at the clean but threadbare towel that Pam had dropped off in the room before taking Myst away for her meds. But the real significance of today was something she was not able to even think about this morning. Today was the day of her first weekly examination by the Doctor.

Officially this meant he was going to reassess her condition, see if her medications needed to change, and potentially make decisions about whether and when she could go home. But after what Myst had told her, Claire did not think this last one was going to happen any time soon. If what she had been told about the

Doctor was true, she did not want to see him. She did not want to be seen *by* him. She did not want him looking at her, touching her. The very thought of it was like a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach.

After a considerably longer than usual wait, Pam returned with Myst, looking sweaty and shaken, as usual.

“Your turn, Claire, honey,” Pam intoned calmly as if today was just a day like any other day.

Claire followed Pam out the door, down the hall, her bare feet padding softly on the worn out old carpet. Then, the beep of Pam’s electronic ID card on the door to the medical wing. The carpet was replaced by cold, hard, stone tile. Claire shivered. After having walked this way every day, her poor feet knew it by heart. But just when her muscle memory told her to turn left into the same room 423 she’d been going to all week, Pam continued walking without saying anything. Clearly today’s events were going to take place in a different room.

They passed more doors, and turned left down a hallway that Claire had never been in before. It had the same brick walls as the hallway that she’d just been in, only it was darker because it had no windows. It was lit not by the ubiquitous buzzing fluorescent tube lights, but by bare lightbulbs in industrial-looking metal receptacles that looked like little cages. Obviously this hallway had been built long before electricity was any sort of concern, and the lighting installed much later. Some of the lightbulbs were flickering like candles, some of

them were out altogether.

“I’ll have to tell Billy to change these,” Pam muttered, half to herself, half out loud. Claire shuddered, she did not like to be reminded of the existence of the janitor.

This hallway smelled different. The other, sunlit hallway, had smelled like something — paint, possibly — baking in the heat of the radiators that sat below the windows. This hallway had no windows and no radiators. It was colder. Compared to the air in the sunny hallway, it felt like walking into a cave. Yes, a cave had this same cold, clammy air. Claire remembered this from when she had been on a cave tour when she was a little girl, with Liz, and Mom and Dad. She stopped. She did not want to think about her parents now. She did not want to imagine what they would think if they knew she’d ended up in a place like *this*.

Finally, through a door that was marked 418, and into an exam room. This room was larger than the usual one, with high ceilings. It looked older, like it was original to the old brick building rather than shoehorned in later in a renovation. One wall was filled with high windows, arched at their tops, protected like every other window in this hospital with heavy iron bars. The light coming through these windows seemed to be the only light in the room. As usual, the door closed with a click and Claire knew she was not getting out of the room without someone to let her out.

“Just a minute, sweetie,” Pam said, directing Claire’s attention to an ancient-looking exam table parallel to

the windows. Its legs were metal, and its top was surfaced in black... leather? It looked like leather. Pam sprayed it down with some kind of disinfectant, and wiped it with a paper towel, but did not cover it with paper. She patted the surface with her hand to let Claire know it was time to sit down.

The table was just low enough to sit on unaided if Claire hopped slightly. Which she did, as she did not want to ask for any help. Her gown, of course, came open in the back and her bare skin smacked against the leather surface. She did not like the feeling of it. It didn't feel medical. It felt more like, she thought, like being in a dungeon in some medieval castle.

She thought of the things Myst had told her about, and shuddered again.

Just then she heard a noise coming from an unexpected side of the room. She turned to see another door, not the one she'd come in by, opening.

And there he was. The Doctor stepped into the room, and stood next to the exam table.

His blue shirt looked crisply ironed, beneath his gleaming white lab-coat. His shoes were polished brown leather. He had a stethoscope around his neck. His short brown hair was neatly combed. As usual, the only sign of any chaos was his stubble. Claire tried not to, but she couldn't help imagining what it would feel like to touch that man's face. To feel the stubble scrape across her skin like a wire brush, accompanied

by his hot breath. A third time, she shuddered. She thought she caught herself doing so audibly this time.

“Leave us, Pam,” he said, “I’m going to take care of things *personally* today.”

“You don’t need me to stay, Doctor, to assist in the exam?” Pam asked.

“I’ve got it, Pam,” the Doctor said again.

Pam placed her hand on Claire’s shoulder and said, “I’ll be back to get you soon, sweetie. Be a good girl for me while I’m gone,” and left. The door locked itself behind her.

“That’s right, Claire,” the Doctor repeated, “be a *good girl* and this will all be over quickly.” Claire did not like the emphasis he placed on these words. “We will begin with a physical exam.”

He began with the stethoscope. As usual, the diaphragm was placed on her back, on the bare skin of her back where the gown was open. As usual, the stethoscope was very cold. She jumped slightly.

“Relax, Claire. Breathe.”

As Claire slowly breathed in and out, the instrument was moved around on her back. First higher, and then, to her horror, lower. *How much lower is he going to go with that?* she thought. She did not like the idea of him being back there, with the gown open, and her... no, she wasn’t going to think about that right now.

The Doctor moved the stethoscope to her chest. He

pulled on her gown to pull it down loose off of one shoulder. It seemed in danger of falling off completely, and she instinctively moved her hand up to hold it on. As she did so, her hand briefly brushed against his. She felt the warmth, the steadiness. Her own hands were trembling.

Without saying anything, he took her hand in his and guided it away from the gown and back down to the table. The gown slipped slightly but stayed on. He moved the scope lower, as far down as the gown's current position exposed her, and then pulled the gown back up onto her shoulder to cover her completely.

"Good," he said, writing something and tapping the pen against the clipboard.

"Sit up straight," he said.

The Doctor took Claire's left wrist, and felt her pulse, timing it using the second hand of his watch. With all of her power of concentration, she'd willed her heartbeat to remain normal. It was no use. She could feel her heart racing the whole time. She couldn't see what he was writing on the clipboard, but she knew it was going to show her heart was beating way too fast.

He placed the blood pressure cuff on her arm, and began to inflate it. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe slowly and calmly, to avoid a high blood pressure. The cuff inflated until it was so tight she could barely stand it.

"Good," he said again, as he deflated and removed it.

Claire didn't know what could possibly be good about it.

He placed his hand on her shoulder and said, "lie back on the table for me."

Carefully, minding the hem of the gown like it was a matter of life and death, Claire lifted her legs and swung her bare feet up onto the table, and then, finally, leaned back until she was flat on her back on the hard, smooth, leather surface.

She was briefly relieved that her back, with the open gown, was now safely against the table.

"Place your hands above your head, and keep them there," the Doctor said calmly.

Claire was terrified of what this might do to the gown, which seemed like it was just barely long enough, as if the slightest upward pull might cause it to not be long enough at all. She hesitated.

The Doctor waited, silently.

After a few tense seconds, she moved her hands up behind her head. The gown stayed where it was.

Another moment of relief! She wondered what new horror lay in store, to knock her back out of this brief calm.

Without warning the Doctor began poking and prodding her side with his hands. It didn't hurt, it just felt odd, as this kind of thing always did.

“Any pain here?” he said, pressing at a spot that Claire assumed was some internal organ.

“No,” she answered with a tense, squeaky voice.

He moved his hands around, pushing into her sides and belly in several other spots. Every time she wanted to squirm.

“Excellent,” he said, stopping to write on the clipboard yet again.

He stepped down to the foot of the table, where her bare feet waited, cold in the room’s chill air.

What now? she wondered.

Then he reached for her ankle. He lifted her foot slightly, rotated it, examining the joint. The feeling of someone touching her bare feet was unusual, unnerving. Instinctively, she flinched.

“Pain?” he asked, pressing his thumbs along the sole of her foot. “Any swelling here?”

“N-no,” Claire said, not sure how much longer she was going to be able to hold still for this. It didn’t hurt or tickle, really, but the desire to pull her foot away from him was strong and growing.

He repeated the process with her other foot. Somehow, she remained motionless.

“Good,” he said again, making another note.

He grabbed Claire’s right leg and pulled it up off the table, until it was nearly vertical, then slowly flexed

the leg at the knee until the calf was parallel to the table. He held it there momentarily then moved the leg around in its socket, carefully observing the motions. The bottom of the gown shifted constantly as he was doing this, moving up and down and back and forth.

Oh no, oh God, oh no, put my leg back down, he can see... Claire thought, but couldn't bring herself to complete the sentence in her head.

The Doctor, however, appeared uninterested in what the gown was doing, and paid attention only to the leg. He placed the right leg back down, slowly, onto the table. The gown fell back into place. Claire could breathe.

With an agonizingly deliberate pace, his footsteps echoing on the floor, he walked around to the other side of the table and did the same thing to her left leg.

"All very good," he said, picking up the clipboard and scratching some more with the pen.

He went over to a nearby cabinet, pulled open a drawer, and produced out of it a drop-cloth, like a bedsheet but of similar material to her hospital gown. He partly unfolded it, so that it was still a double layer, and placed it over her, covering her from the waist down to her knees. This was a surprising act of mercy. But why hadn't he done it already?

He started now to pull at the hem of her hospital gown, pulling it upwards. Her right hand reflexively started

to move down to put it back down, but he caught it and moved it back up behind her head.

“Hold still,” he said quietly. “This is for *your* modesty, Claire.”

He pulled the gown up, until it had exposed her bare, trembling stomach. He pulled the drop cloth down slightly, baring as much of her abdomen as possible, including the upper parts of her hips. There she lay, wondering what he would do now. More poking, more prodding?

To her surprise he took up the stethoscope again, and placed it on the skin of her belly, and moved it around to several places, listening to each one for several seconds. What he was listening for, she could not guess.

“Mmm-hmmm,” he said to himself. He pulled the gown back down, and pulled the cloth back over it. The combination of gown and drop-cloth now covered her completely again. Again, a sigh of relief. He took the clipboard and wrote something down.

“Now, Claire,” he intoned, “why don’t you roll over on your belly?”

Without saying anything, Claire complied. With as much grace as possible, which she imagined was not much, she turned over on her belly while the Doctor held the cloth to prevent it from wrapping around her.

Her face was now pressed against the leather table, her head resting on her own hands. The chill air of the

room now directly touched her on her back, where the gown was open. She could feel this all the way down to the small of her back, where the drop cloth was still protecting her. Briefly, she caught herself feeling gratitude.

There was an uncomfortable amount of silence, while the Doctor fiddled with something on the table. She could not see what he was doing, with her face down on the table. She turned her head as much as she could to look, and saw it. The Doctor was holding a thermometer. A glass one. The same kind Pam used.

Claire stared at it, as the Doctor lubricated it. She should have known this was what he meant by “personally.” He was going to be the one doing *that* to her. Her mind had blocked out this obvious conclusion from conscious thought. She re-buried her face in her hands, and tried to forget what she’d seen.

He patted her briefly on the small of her back, over the cloth, and said, “raise your hips up into the air for me, Claire.”

Claire sat still and silent.

“Claire,” he repeated, “be a *good girl* or there will be consequences.”

Trembling, Claire pushed her backside up off of the table using her legs, until she was resting on her knees. She was now pointed up at an angle, still covered by the cloth. She could feel the air flowing up under the cloth from all sides. The air hit her inner thighs. *I’ve been*

sweating, she thought, or told herself — not wanting to think about what else it might be.

There was another awkward silence, and she knew what was about to happen.

Oh no oh no oh God he's going to...

She felt the cloth move as he pulled on it. Then she felt it slide off her, and the chill room air hit her now, unbroken from her back to her legs. This was it. The moment he could see everything. She was exposed. She lay there, her face in her hands, and worked hard to not cry. She was used to Pam seeing her exposed like this, but this was worse. This was *him*. Not just that it was a man, but that it was *this* man. This man she'd heard things about that she still could just barely believe. She lay there trembling, her hindquarters bared and presented to this man as if for... she did not want to finish that thought. She shrugged, shook it off.

The feel of the air flowing between her legs told her everything she needed to know. Everything was out in the open, visible. For some interminable seconds, she lay there motionless, on display.

He parted her buttocks with one hand, and spread lube — cold lube, straight from the bottle — on her. She recoiled from the feel of it. She felt a finger circling, spreading it. Then, imperceptibly at first, and then definitely, insistently, a gloved and lubricated fingertip pushed its way in.

Claire's mind raced, recoiled at the feeling of someone,

anyone, touching her *there*, of anything, anyone, anything that was part of anyone, being *inside her* there. The finger was only in momentarily. It popped back out as quickly as it had been inserted.

“Oh...” Claire let out a gentle gasp of surprise at the feeling of the finger going out of her.

“Shhh! Just making sure you are good and ready for it, Claire. Here it comes...,” he said, and patted her on the buttocks. Then inserted the heavily lubed thermometer.

Oh God this is always Hell it's in me it's in me I don't want it get it out.... Her mind raced. No one said anything while he used his watch to time the thermometer. *Oh please oh please take it out.* Then it was out.

“Baseline,” he said, and then, “stay in this position for your medication.”

Oh of course, now this...

She closed her eyes extra tight, and tried to ignore the sensation of the suppository going into her. She trembled and shuddered as its large, greasy body worked its way in. She'd been experiencing this all week, but it was much worse with this man doing it. He was not hurting her, he was as slow and deliberate as Pam was. But having *him* see her there, see her *like this*, was worse. So much worse.

The first suppository melted away, and the second one

was inserted. It seemed like it took forever to melt. She trembled, tried not to make any sound.

“Now,” he said, “I will resume the exam.”

What? What else could he possibly...

A heavily lubed finger was pushed into her.

Oh God oh no somebody help me

The finger slowly worked its way in, opening her up.

“Relax, Claire, let it in,” he said.

Now it was deep inside of her. In the *inner sanctum*. He felt around inside there, for what he did not say. “Ahh... ahhh,” she said involuntarily, trying not to start sobbing. His finger was in there. *His finger*. This man she had been trying for a week to appear composed and calm before, this man who alone decided her fate, this man whose motives she now seriously questioned. His finger was inside her, exploring her.

This could not be happening. This *was not* happening. Her mind was gone. She was not there, not in this room, not undergoing any of this, in her mind.

She was back in the cave, with Liz and Mom and Dad. Liz said “Dad! Julie! We are in a maze of twisty little passages all alike. No no, you guys, you don’t get it. We are in *the* maze of twisty little passages. This is it, guys, this is it!” Claire had no idea what Liz meant. Dad seemed impressed. Mom had seemed amazed, looked at the cave, looked at Liz, and laughed.

Why was this funny, Claire asked, and Liz and Mom explained. . .

And then she was back in the room, breathing. He covered her back up with the drop-cloth.

“Roll over, Claire. Sit up. The exam is over.” The Doctor pushed a button next to a speaker on the wall, “Pam, we are ready to go now.”

Claire wondered, what anything that had just happened had to do with her mental health, or how any of it was supposed to help the Doctor decide how much longer she needed to stay. *Myst is right*, Claire thought, *he’s not even pretending to care about my mind, or if I’m sane or not. He’s never going to let me out of here.*

Pam came back in, placed one hand softly on Claire’s shoulder again, as Claire sat cowering under the drop cloth. With a rare note of genuine empathy, Pam said “Oh baby. . .,” then snapped back to her usual attitude, “Come on, sweetie, let’s get you back to your wing for breakfast.”

Claire stared at her oatmeal.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Myst asked, finally breaking the silence for the first time since Claire had returned to her.

“No.”

“Do you want to talk about anything else?”

“Not really.”

“You sure? Tell me something from before. From before you were in the hospital, I mean. Tell me about your life *out there*.”

“Well, I was thinking about when I was a kid, and my family went to visit this cave, down in Kentucky, and my sister Liz got all excited because this was the cave that inspired some old videogame. Well, sort of a videogame. It was all words, there were no pictures. She helped me play it later, on the computer she kept in her room. . . ”

“Wait, your sister had a computer *in her room* with the *Internet* on it?”

“Well yeah but she was 17, and she did coding stuff on it. It was the past family computer that they would have thrown out, but Liz begged to keep it. Anyway, the game. There was a white house, and a mailbox, and caves under the house. . . ”

“Ohhh! Ohh! Me too! I played that too! We had it on the computer at school, the old computer that sat in the corner of the classroom, the one with all the old games. I played the hell out of that game. How far did you get, Claire?”

“I was eaten by a grue.”

“Me too! Claire, did you ever wonder what a grue looks like?”

“Not really.”

“Well I couldn’t stop wondering, until I dreamed about it. I was in the living room of that house and I saw a grue come climbing in the window, in the daylight, and I finally got to see it.”

“Myst, the game didn’t have any pictures.”

“In my dreams it did! And anyway, the grue was furry, and he had a big goofy head with big round eyes, and his eyebrows floating in space not attached to his head, like in cartoons, and he had eyes that were smoky, half open, like he’d been smoking and he was up to something!”

“Myst, this is ridiculous, this isn’t a monster, it’s just some kind of goofy-looking cartoon character.”

“Well he’s my monster and he was cartoony as shit! And then I saw his claws. Big, long, pointy claws a foot long. . . ”

“Okay, that’s creepy now.”

“Damn right, but it gets worse, he started talking and it sounded like an old crooner, like an old jazz guy or something, in an old Looney Tunes, he said *twenty three skiddoo kiddo*.”

Claire was laughing, “No, he did not!”

Myst sang, “doo-be-doo-be-doo. . . ”

“Myst! No, stop, you’re making milk shoot out my nose!”

Chapter 8

Complicated

Liz pulled her car up to the gatehouse and stopped before the closed gate. This tiny building was no bigger than a phone booth, she noticed. Liz had never seen a real phone booth, of course, but she'd seen a lot of old movies. Most people had seen them too, probably, so everybody still knew what a phone booth looked like. Even people that didn't watch old movies knew that Superman changed clothes in a phone booth. And it was certainly a safer bet to say it looked like a phone booth than to say what it actually looked even more like, which was the TARDIS. Because then she'd have to explain what *that* was. Not that that mattered. None of this mattered. She wasn't here to describe the gatehouse for posterity, she was here to try to get Claire out of the mental hospital. *Why is my brain like this*, she thought.

The window of the gatehouse was closed, but she could see that it was unoccupied. Clearly this structure itself was a relic from an earlier era, before downsizing, before deinstitutionalization. On the window, taped from the other side to keep it out of the elements, a sign said:

STATE HOSPITAL FOR WOMEN.

YOU ARE UNDER VIDEO SURVEILLANCE.

Visiting Hours 8–5 M–F.

Visitors: Use Call Button For Admittance
During Visiting Hours.

Employers: Use Key Card.

Emergency Services: Use Master Key.

“Employers?”, Liz thought. Surely that was a typo that was supposed to say “Employees.” But the sign looked like it had been taped up there a long time. Wouldn’t they fix it? Maybe not. Maybe nobody had noticed, maybe nobody had ever looked at it. Employees would already know to use their cards. And anybody official enough to have a Master Key would know to use it. Liz wondered what a “Master Key” looked like.

She pressed the button next to the intercom speaker.

“Front desk here,” came the tinny, distorted reply, “identify yourself and who are you here to see.”

“Liz Allman, to see Claire Allman,” she said.

“I don’t see you on the list, Ms. Allman.”

“Look under Elizabeth,” Liz repeated for the 1000th time in her life.

“Ok, I’ll buzz you in. Drive through the gate as soon as it opens, it closes automatically.”

Slowly, with a metal-on-metal grinding sound, like the sound of a freight train stopping, the gate slid open. As soon as it was open sufficiently wide for the car, Liz drove through quickly while it was still moving open. She preferred this to the presumed alternative if she hesitated, which was driving through it as it was closing on her. In the rearview mirror she watched as the gate re-closed behind her. There was an identical gatehouse on the other side of the fence, presumably she was going to need to get buzzed out by the same person who had just buzzed her in.

She wondered if that clinking, clanking, slow moving gate was seriously the thing that stopped patients from wandering out. Surely not, she corrected herself immediately. Certainly they already aren’t allowed anywhere near the gate. But then again, both the gate and the fence it was a part of were far from mere formalities. Anyone who did manage to bypass other security measures would still have to deal with a tall chainlink fence topped with barbed wire. *Defense in depth*, Liz thought, a term that she mainly associated with all of the “defensive coding” courses she regularly had to pass to keep her job.

With the gate behind her, Liz’s mind wandered back to thoughts of the “Master Key.” She imagined it being

one of those oversized golden keys that cities hand out as awards. Don't they? Was that still a thing? Was it *ever* a thing, or was it just something they made up for the Simpsons, when Homer thought his was chocolate and tried to eat it. No, of *course* that's not what they were. Even Liz knew that. Real ones must be normal keys or they couldn't actually be used on any locks. But still, it must be where they got the idea for the big ones, if they were real. Liz wondered if anyone actually made chocolate ones, maybe she'd buy one for Claire as a present when she got out...

Claire! Oh poor Claire, Liz looked again at all the security fencing and "defense in depth" and wondered why in the world her little sister needed to be locked up in a place that looked so much like a prison. She felt slightly guilty now, for thinking about chocolate at a time like this.

The hospital's main building loomed ahead of her. It looked, she thought, even more like a prison than the outer defenses. It clearly looked like it had been built in stages. The first, presumably Victorian stage, was of stone, and looked for all the world like a castle. Not like a fairy-tale castle, of course, like an actual medieval fortress. Square, massive, solid, as if built to withstand a siege. This was of course just as fanciful, Liz thought, as if it had been built to look like Disneyland. Nobody in the 19th century was ever going to attack an insane asylum. Or would they? What if the state was actually using it as a prison for labor leaders, socialists, anarchists, such people were often called "mad" by the

authorities. No, even better — suffragettes! It was the women's asylum after all, it would've been feminists declared mad and placed in there. Look how scared those Victorian men were of women, Liz thought, *they had to lock us up in a place like that.*

Okay, maybe not literally. We don't know why it was built like that. All we know is Claire is in there now

But, really, she thought, of course it wasn't real, but would make a good movie, she was imagining some kind of epic "storming the Bastille" moment where the people besiege a mental asylum to free politically-imprisoned suffragettes, guessing who would play who in the movie, wondering if the tie-in videogame would suck... oh wait, maybe it starts as a game. Then the movie later. That's better. *Focus on Claire.*

To the sides and behind, the original stone core was attached to later additions — probably New Deal era — defiantly Deco, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the medieval monstrosity. They rose almost as high, only the tallest spires of the old castle overtopping them. Liz wondered if those tower-like corners had ever actually been used as lookout posts, watching for stray patients on the grounds, or if they were just security theater, like at the airport.

In front of all that sat a low, ground-hugging entrance wing, the newest part, with an incongruously mid-century-modern look. It reminded her of a deck of cards her grandparents kept from the 1964 World's Fair — each card showed a different building, and

every one was the most “1964” thing imaginable. She parked in front of the building and started toward the doors, through a small and mostly unattended garden.

A marble sculpture stood along the path: impossibly beautiful neoclassical figures, gods or angels or something. The plaque read: *Cupid and Psyche, carved by Augustus Blomfeld, a gift of the Johnson Family Trust, 1926.*

Johnson. One of the cards in that deck had shown the S.C. Johnson Wax Building — a name she knew from the hornet spray her dad used. She once watched him sprint across the yard, chased by an angry swarm after the can sputtered out too soon. As a kid, she’d imagined the Johnson Wax pavilion at the World’s Fair filled with giant insect statues — hornets, ants, cockroaches — glaring down at visitors.

She’d never been to a World’s Fair. There hadn’t been one in the U.S. in her lifetime. *Is it possible to miss a place you’ve never been?* The thought hit her hard. Somewhere in the back of her mind John Linnell started singing about a small girl all alone at the ’64 World’s Fair.

Liz was overwhelmed. She avoided crying only because she’d reached the front door.

The door was a solid, wooden or possibly metal door - it was hard to tell - with a small window in it. The window was the kind with the cross-hatched pattern often seen in older “shatterproof” windows. *You don’t*

see that anymore, thought Liz. It reminded her of high school, where the big glass window that separated the principal's office from the main hallway was made of precisely that kind of glass.

She tried the handle, but the door was locked. She noted another intercom, like the one at the gatehouse, next to the door and pressed its button.

The same voice, with the same tone and same amount of distortion, greeted her again. "Front desk. Who are you and who are you here to see?"

"Liz — I mean, Elizabeth Allman. For Claire Allman."

She wondered how the woman on the other end of the intercom could ask her the same thing again, like she hadn't just asked it, like Liz was stuck in a loop. Was she even talking to a human? No, no, they wouldn't put a computer in charge of letting people in and out of a secure place like this. Then again, with all the downsizing and skeleton crew this place seemed to be running on, who knows, maybe they would, maybe it was just some ancient automated system from 1998 still chugging along. But no, *really*, Liz, they wouldn't do that. They wouldn't. Probably.

"Come in," and she heard an electronic click, the front desk had remotely unlocked the door for her.

If the door reminded her a little of high school, stepping into the waiting room and lobby was like going back in time. You couldn't have planned this place to look more... like itself... than it did. It reminded her

of school, of going to the DMV, it reminded her of how the county health department looked when she'd had to go there to take mandatory food safety training before she could get her first job.

When she was 16, Liz was the cashier at Pizza Dee-Luxe, a mom-and-pop operation. Literally, the co-owners were a married couple in their fifties. In spite of the county-mandated training, Liz rarely actually handled food. Mr. Civitelli did most of the scheduling and assigning of employees' shifts, as well as making the dough personally, and he preferred to keep the girls out front on the cash register where the customers could see them, not in the back making pizza and definitely not out on the roads delivering pizzas.

Mr. C believed in keeping girls safe, he said, and his idea of "safety" was things like his dress code for female employees, which included rules like "none of those tops that tie in the back, because all the fellas have to do is untie it and there ya go!" She wasn't sure if he also lectured the "fellas" not to be untying anyone's clothes. *I would've made a lot more in tips if they let me deliver pizza*, she thought.

Wait... why am I thinking about pizza?!, she stopped herself and returned her mind to the matter at hand. She blinked, forcing the memory back into its proper place, and there he was.

Standing at the front desk waiting to see her was a man in a white lab coat, pink shirt, gray slacks. He had neat brown hair and just a little bit of 5 o'clock shadow.

Behind his glasses she could see his eyes, intense brown eyes, looking into her own. For a second she couldn't meet them, she looked down at the floor, where she noticed his polished brown leather shoes. *I bet those shoes clack when he walks*, she thought. *Look in his eyes, you nerd, this is Claire's doctor!* She lifted her eyes back up to his face, forcing herself to meet and greet this man, *for Claire*.

That's right, Liz, don't think about any of this other bullshit, think about Claire. Do it for her. Liz thought about Claire. When she was 13, when Claire was born, and Julie was nursing her, and offering to hand the baby over, Liz was terrified she'd drop Claire, but Dad insisted. She didn't drop her. She held the baby until she was asleep. *I look like Kitty Pryde holding that baby that later became Cable*, Liz said to Dad and Julie and Dad just nodded, but Julie knew what she meant and had to dry her eyes...

When Liz was 16, and Claire was 3, Liz and her friends would be just about to leave the house, to go "cruise" which to them just meant aimlessly driving around eating french fries and listening to mix CDs — everybody made their own mixes and they had to work out a system to make sure everybody's got heard and nobody got upset — not meeting any boys... Claire would come up with her little pigtails asking if they were going to get ice cream and if they were she wanted to go, and before you knew it Claire would be sitting in the back of the car in her carseat with the wind blowing in her face eating a tiny little ice cream cone, listening

to Avril Lavigne or something, and Liz's friends didn't mind they all loved Claire, she was everybody's little baby sister. . .

And Dad always told her, "Lizzie, if anything ever happens to Julie and me, Claire is your responsibility! I mean that Lizzie, it's in my will! She's yours." And Liz always thought this was just one of those things people say, like it was supposed to make her more of a responsible person, and maybe that's how Dad meant it, but he didn't know, he couldn't know, what was coming. And then, when Claire was 8, and Liz was 21, Claire became Liz's responsibility. Until Claire was 18, yes, but really for the rest of Liz's life.

When Claire was 11 and got a trophy for being the top of her class, Liz took her out for ice cream, a full sized cone this time. When she was 13 and got her heart broken for the first time, Liz was the one she cried to. When Claire was 15 and learning to drive, Liz was the one in the car next to her. Liz's car, the same one Liz got on her 16th birthday, a new car had not been on her list of priorities and besides a Civic is forever.

When Claire graduated high school at the head of her class with a "full ride" to the U. — the school Liz had had to transfer away from when Claire became hers — Liz was in the stands cheering. Then she gave her all of her old school swag, which she'd kept, just in case she ever went back, and later just in case Claire ever went. When Claire needed extra money to pay sorority dues, because no scholarship covers that, Liz dug into

her pockets.

When Claire was out of the house, it was just Liz and Biscuit again. Biscuit was a beagle, the puppy that Liz adopted when she was in college, in spite of everybody saying it was a bad idea to try to have a puppy when you're in college. *And it was.* And then, Biscuit was gone, and it was just Liz. She couldn't remember the last time she had a home all to herself with nobody and no beagle. Had she ever?

When Claire was 22 and graduated college, Liz was in the stands again, cheering again. When Claire got a job, a real job, not serving pizza for Mr. Civitelli — not the same one, his son, who was not very different just younger — a real job, in Human Resources, Liz exhaled. She'd done it. Liz relaxed and had a glass of wine. She'd done it. She'd raised Claire. She'd gotten her to safety. She'd finished the job. She'd earned the right to relax. She'd earned the glass of wine. She'd earned the quiet. She'd earned—

And now Claire was here, in this place, and this man, this Doctor, impossible to face as he was, was in charge of her.

"Ms. Allman?" he said.

"Doctor," Liz said sternly, "I demand to see my sister at once."

Chapter 9

Look Your Best

“Claire, honey,” Pam said gently, “it’s time to get ready. Your visitor will be here soon.”

Claire looked up from the bed in shock. Pam wasn’t carrying another hospital gown, she was carrying *clothes*. A whole stack of them, folded neatly, in Claire’s size: pajamas, a robe, socks. And — she couldn’t believe it — *underwear*. Plain white cotton underwear, the kind Myst wore.

Pam set the stack on Claire’s bed, then placed a pair of slippers on the floor. These were *not* Myst’s plain white terrycloth slippers. They were pink bunny slippers, with button noses, yarn whiskers, little pink ears, and round little eyes that stared up at her.

Claire whispered, “Why? Pam... why?”

“Because we want all of our girls to look their best for their visitors,” Pam said, as she left the room.

Myst raised an eyebrow. “Do you want me to leave while you change?”

“Don’t bother — you do it all the time in front of me,” Claire said, grabbing the underwear and stepping into them while still shielded by the gown. She turned toward the wall, let the gown slip off her shoulders and drift to the floor, and put on the bra. When she turned back around, she stood grinning with her hands on her hips like a child pretending to be a superhero.

Myst snorted. “Get your clothes on right now, young lady!”

Claire laughed and pulled on the hospital socks. They were cheap, thin, and scratchy, but after weeks of bare feet on cold floors, they felt like a luxury. The pajamas came next: flimsy, institutional, but *pants*. A top. A robe with no belt — of course — but she didn’t care. And finally, the bunny slippers.

“Claire Bear, you look *adorable*,” Myst said, and the two of them embraced, laughing.

Pam poked her head back in. “Okay, sweetie — we don’t want to keep our guest waiting!”

“Can Myst meet her too?” Claire asked hopefully.

“No, sweetie. Not today.”

Claire’s face fell, but Myst squeezed her hand. “Maybe next time.”

Claire followed Pam out the door and down the hallway toward the breakroom. One corner of the room had clearly been staged for this visit — no other patients anywhere nearby, as if the area had been pre-emptively cleared. Paper holiday decorations covered the walls in a chaotic, over-inclusive jumble: Christmas trees and wreaths, menorahs and Stars of David, bright geometric Kwanzaa patterns. The TV played one of those channels that showed nothing but a crackling fireplace log.

Oh, Claire remembered suddenly, *it is getting close to Christmas*. It was hard to keep track in here. She counted backward in her head — exams every Tuesday, she'd had one yesterday — which meant today must be December 20th. The thought made her stomach twist; remembering the exam always did.

“Sit here, sweetie,” Pam said, guiding her to a couch in the corner. Pam sat beside her, hands folded neatly in her lap. On the coffee table in front of them sat a vase of fresh flowers. Claire stared at them. She had never seen flowers in this hospital.

Across the room, in the opposite corner, Myst sat in a chair in her white robe, watching her. That was apparently as close as the staff would allow her to be.

Claire felt a flicker of comfort — and then her heart skipped a beat.

The Doctor entered the room.

Her whole body went rigid. *Oh God, not him again...*

But then she saw who was walking beside him, listening intently to whatever he was saying.

Liz.

Liz, in her winter coat, her reddish light-brown hair looking windblown, her face reddened from the wind, but bright with concern and hope. Liz looked like she had been waiting weeks for this moment, as had Claire.

Liz has no idea what I've been through, Claire thought. Suddenly she realized she was not going to be able to tell Liz what it was really like in here. Liz was going to see the pajamas, the robe, the bunny slippers. Liz was going to think all of these things meant Claire was comfortable, and warm, and safe here. *I should have known that was why they wanted me to "look my best"*, she realized. *I'm just a doll to these people, they dress me how they want me. I was Corporate Claire, with my HR desk playset. Then I became Patient Claire, with hospital gown, no shoes. Today I'm Bunny Slippers Claire.*

Liz spoke first. "Claire..." she said, with the tiredness in her voice of someone who's been worrying herself sick and losing sleep over someone.

Claire stood up and threw herself into Liz's arms, leaning her head onto Liz's shoulder. Liz hugged her tight and stroked her hair the way she always had, the way she used to when Claire was little and scared. It made Claire feel safe in a way nothing in this place had since she got here.

And then the smell hit her — winter air, laundry detergent, and that same warm perfume Liz had worn since college. Before Claire could stop herself, tears filled her eyes.

When they'd both sat down on the couch, the Doctor, who was sitting in a nearby armchair, asked, "Would you like some coffee, Ms. Allman?"

Simultaneously, talking over each other, Claire said "no" and Liz said "yes." Claire did not much care for coffee and rarely drank it, especially not here where even she knew enough about coffee to know that it couldn't possibly be any good, from the way it smelled.

"Pam," smiled the Doctor, "go and get Ms. Allman some coffee."

Pam stared at the man for a moment, with a look that was either indignation at being asked to complete such an errand, or reluctance to leave Claire's side.

Liz, again, broke the silence. "I'll get it myself, Pam," she said, and headed towards the machine. "Which pot is the decaf?"

"It's all decaf, Miss," said Pam, "we don't want these girls gettin' riled up on it."

Of course it's decaf, thought Claire. This coffee was purely ornamental. The always old, always burning smell of the machine was like a twisted parody of a scent diffuser — as if someone actually liked that smell and kept the appliance running all day to create it.

“It’s so good to finally see you in person, Claire,” said Liz, in a cheerful tone that didn’t actually sound much like Liz, “how are you feeling? I’ve been so worried about you.”

“I’m. . .,” Claire hesitated, “feeling ok, I guess. Better than I was,” she lied. She didn’t know what else to do. She couldn’t possibly say what was really going on in here. Liz wouldn’t believe it. *Liz will think I’m crazy if I tell her what it’s really like in here.*

“How are they treating you? Are you comfortable?”

“I’m. . . ok. I’m comfortable. The food’s pretty good. I’m making *friends* here. I want to come home,” was all she could say.

“I know you do, Claire, I know. And you will as soon as your Doctor says you’re better, as soon as it’s safe for you to be alone.”

Yes, of course he’s going to tell you I’m not safe. Oh, Liz, if only you knew what he was like, was what Claire couldn’t say. The Doctor was, of course, sitting right there, looking alternately at Claire and Liz.

“Ms. Allman,” he said to Liz, “your sister is in a very fragile state, as you can see. We’ll continue to re-assess her situation as needed, to plan her discharge.”

“Tell me about your friends, Claire.” Liz seemed to be looking for stuff to talk about other than getting Claire out.

“Well. . . all the girls in my therapy group, that I’ve

met so far, are really nice. But the nicest one, and the coolest, is Myst. Oh, Liz, she's so smart, and she's an artist. . . ."

Liz looked at Pam and the Doctor. "So, Claire is with patients with similar. . . situations as herself?"

"Yes, Ma'am. This floor of this wing is the low-security section. All of our patients in this area are low-risk, low-needs, just young women that need to be stabilized and put back on their own two feet. . . ."

While the Doctor talked, Claire stared at her feet, and the bunnies stared back.

"Pam here," the Doctor continued, "is the charge nurse of this section, she sees the patients far more than I do, she can tell you what they're like."

"They're all a bunch of little sweethearts," drawled Pam, "they're all my baby girls and just the nicest little things, Claire is in real good company here."

"So, Claire, tell me more about this Myst, where's she from? How old is she?"

"She's 22, and she's from Atlanta. Well, *near* Atlanta, anyway. But she's going to school at State. She has a sister that lives downtown. Myst is studying psych, she wants to help people like her," Claire said, and then remembered to add, "and me. And she has a dog, Shadow, but he's back down in Atlanta. She misses him, she wants to bring him to live with her, when she gets a bigger place."

“Oh, she sounds nice. Claire, I’m happy you are meeting people.” Liz sounded like she was just settling into the idea that Claire might be here a while. “If you’re going to have to be somewhere you don’t want to be, at least you have someone here with you that you like.”

“Oh, she’s wonderful, Liz, I can’t wait for you to meet her. And there’s also Nikki, she’s a student at *your* old school, I mean where you went once you moved back here. She’s studying game design. She’s only a freshman, poor thing.”

“She’s a darlin’,” added Pam, “and so is Misty!”

“As you can see, Ms. Allman, we’ve placed Claire in a circle of like-minded young women to help her recovery.”

“Yes, Doctor,” agreed Liz, “it certainly sounds like it. Claire, what do you do to pass the time in here?”

“Oh... there’s all kinds of stuff. Drawing, crafting, board games, movie night...” Claire said anything she could to avoid mentioning the endless boredom of this place, punctuated only by moments of terror.

“Young women like Claire thrive in structure,” said the Doctor. “We provide them a safe place to heal and grow. Our nurse-therapist, Laura, will tell you more about it when you meet with her next.”

Claire wondered what kinds of things Laura was going to tell Liz about her.

“Claire,” said Liz, “I need to get going now. I’ll see you again as soon as I can, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Liz...” Claire wanted to beg Liz to take her with her. “I love you!” She leaned over to Liz and hugged her, nestling herself into Liz’s arms. The two stayed like that for a few seconds, again.

“Okay, Ms. Allman, it’s time to go, Laura is waiting.”

As Liz and the Doctor walked away, Pam added, “Nice to meet you, Miss! I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day.” Once Liz was completely out of the room and the door closed behind her, Pam said to Claire, “Ok, sweetie, you can relax now for a little bit. I’ll be back,” and left herself.

Myst immediately came over to sit with Claire, now that there was no one to stop her.

“Oh my god, Claire,” she could hardly contain herself, “she looks exactly like you described her! I wish they’d let me meet her.”

“I know...” said Claire.

“Here, trade,” said Myst, slipping off her own slippers. “I want the bun-buns!”

Claire pulled her feet out of the bunny slippers and slid them into the pair Myst had just abandoned. They were loose — one shoe-size too large.

Myst jammed the bunnies onto her feet — a tight fit — and propped her feet up on Claire’s knee. “I need to see if I can get me a pair of *these*,” she mused. “What’s wrong, Claire Bear?”

“Oh, Myst, I couldn’t tell her anything! I was so afraid,

so afraid that anything I said would just make it worse. Make me sound like I actually am *crazy*.”

“I know, Claire, I know,” said Myst. “The same thing happened to me. We sat in a room with a videoconference with my parents, and Susan sitting right here in the room with us, and I... well, I tried to tell them, I really tried! I mean, I *did* tell them, but they didn’t hear it. All they heard was me being paranoid and delusional and imagining things, just like *He* told them I was.”

“Oh, Myst, I’m so sorry that happened,” said Claire, placing her hand on Myst’s right bunny, for support.

“I never tried again after that. Never bothered. I knew they wouldn’t believe me. It’s not their fault, really, I wouldn’t believe me either if I was them.”

Pam re-entered the room. “Claire, sweetie, it’s time to change back, your visitor has left the building now.”

“Change... back?”

“Yes, honey, I’ve got a new gown for you, let’s go to your room so you can change into it.”

“Gown? I have to go back to the gown?!”

“Yes, sweetie, this outfit is just for visiting times.”

“This is bullshit, Pam, and you know it,” said Myst, angrily.

“Missy, this is not your business,” said Pam sternly, “come, Claire.”

“Can I keep the bunnies?”

“No, ma’am. Those shoes don’t fit you. You’re gonna hurt your toes stuffing them in there.”

“Well ya got any more of ’em?”

“I’ll check. But this isn’t about you, Missy. Don’t make me call the Boys.”

“It’s always that way with you, isn’t it, Pam? You’re all nice until it comes time to actually be *kind*, and then you resort to violence instead. Calling in your hired goons over bunny slippers.”

Pam pulled out her phone, pressed a few buttons, and said into it, “Security to 201.”

Myst continued to sit with her bunny-clad feet on Claire’s lap, blocking Claire from getting up and walking away.

Silently, the orderlies arrived. They did not pay any mind to Myst or Claire, they looked to Pam for orders.

“Get these slippers off of her, and get her out of the way from interfering with Claire.”

One of the “Boys” grabbed Myst by the shoulders, while the other pulled the slippers off her bare feet and handed them to Pam. Then they both pulled her up off the couch and forced her to stand up.

“You motherfuckers better get your dirty paws offa me!” Myst said, her voice rising.

“Missy, don’t make a scene.”

“And if I do?”

“Take her to 423, boys, and make sure she stays there until I come back there. We’ll give her a shot of something to calm her down.”

“No,” said Myst, trying to struggle out of the men’s arms to no avail. “I didn’t do anything! You can’t...” They paid her no mind, and began to force her to walk.

“No!” she screamed and began flailing, trying to escape their grip. They picked her up, one holding her arms, the other her feet, and carried her away. She wiggled and struggled and shouted, “You motherfuckers! I’ll get you! You’re gonna have to let go of me sooner or later and when you do I’m gonna kick you in the nuts...”

The Boys seemed unimpressed, and disappeared down the hall with their wriggling quarry.

Claire tried to stand up, but her legs didn’t want to move. Only after all echoes of Myst had died away, could she get up.

“Good girl, Claire,” said Pam, “now follow me, let’s get you changed. Don’t worry about Misty - we’ll bring her back to 217 with you once we get her stable.”

Back in her room, Pam placed another blue gown on Claire’s bed and said, “Go ahead and get changed into this, darlin’, I’m gonna go take care of Misty.”

After Pam left the room and closed the door, Claire slowly took everything back off. First the robe, then

Myst's slippers, then her socks, then the pajama top, then the pants, then the bra. Everything went into a pile on the floor. She put on the gown before taking off her panties. Claire looked at the pile of clothing on the floor, and wondered if she should just stuff it into her dresser, maybe Pam would forget about it and let her keep it. *Now that IS crazy! I'll never get away with that*, she reminded herself.

She climbed onto her bed and covered herself with her blanket, not for warmth (the room was, as usual, quite a bit warmer than comfortable), but to try to retain the dignity she'd just stripped off. She wished Myst was here. She wished Liz had taken her home. She wished anything besides what had actually happened.

A few minutes later, a knock came at the door.

"Come in," said Claire, expecting Pam, but surprised she bothered knocking. People here usually just came in whenever they felt like it. It wasn't Pam — it was Nikki and Anna.

"Can we come in?" said Nikki. "We want to wait here for Myst to come back."

"Ok, but I'm fine, I'll be fine." Claire wondered if there was some kind of backup system, where someone else was always ready to stand in for Myst as Claire's "guardian" whenever Myst was indisposed.

"We're here for Myst too," said Anna.

Without knocking, the door opened again and Pam

walked in with the two orderlies, this time rolling a rickety-looking old gurney. Myst was laying on it, unconscious. She was wearing a hospital gown, not her robe. Pam was, in fact, holding the robe. The orderlies picked Myst up and laid her on her bed, flat on her back.

“No no, boys, turn her over,” said Pam, “leave her butter-side-up!”

The orderlies rotated Myst over onto her belly, her face turned to one side. Myst grunted, but didn’t wake up. The back of her gown was open, the bandages covering her injection sites visible through her panties, one in each buttock. Her bare legs and feet looked especially pale.

“For God’s sake, Pam, cover her up!” said Anna, angrily, placing a blanket over Myst from the waist down.

Pam ignored Anna as she gathered up Claire’s clothing off the floor. Pam and the orderlies left as abruptly as they’d entered. On the way out, Pam added, “Misty’s gonna be like this a couple of hours. You girls might not want to wait around for her to wake up, you’ll miss your lunch.”

With Pam out of the room, Claire said to Anna and Nikki, “you guys can go to lunch. I’ll stay with her, she’s my roommate.”

“Nope!” said Anna, sitting beside Myst, holding her hand.

“Let’s go, Claire,” said Nikki.

On the way to the cafeteria, while turning a corner, Nikki stumbled, looked like she was about to fall over, her face was briefly confused and dazed, but before falling she regained her balance, and resumed walking.

“Impressive!” said Claire.

“That right there, is why I’m here. *Fall risk* they call it. I’m supposed to be in a normal hospital, but they ran out of beds. I’m here as *overflow*. I really shouldn’t be here.”

“None of us should be,” said Claire. “None of us.”