

Changeling

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Mom is in the kitchen when I get home.

Somehow she must hear me open the door over the sounds of my dad's football game blaring from the TV and my brothers shouting over video games down the hall, because she calls out to me before I can slink off to my room. "Ruby," she says, "how was school, baby?"

I sigh, kicking my shoes off at the door and trudging into the kitchen. "It was fine."

She's packing the boys' lunches for tomorrow, bread and fruit and deli meat and baby carrots all laid out on the counter in front of her. Her hair is pulled up into a ponytail, curly and blonde like mine. She barely even looks up at me when she says, "That's nice, honey."

I hover in the doorway, unsure if I've been dismissed to leave yet.

"You're home late," she continues, diligently chopping strawberries and sorting them into Ziploc bags. "Did rugby practice run long again?"

I know it's a trap. She makes me and my brothers keep this stupid app on our phones that tracks our locations; she'd have noticed I left school hours ago. She just wants to see if I'll lie.

"A little," I say, "I went over to my friend's house afterwards."

Mom hesitates. "Is this a friend I know?"

I shrug and hope she stops pressing, even if I know she won't. "I dunno, maybe."

"Maybe?"

“Um,” I brace myself, “Lisa?”

My mother pauses, her shoulders deflating in disappointment. “Ruby—”

“I know,” I interrupt her. “I know, I get it.”

Mom hasn’t liked Lisa since middle school. We’ve been friends since we were kids, before all of her dark makeup and black box dye and the septum piercing that nearly made my mother burst a blood vessel.

“I just don’t think she’s a very good influence on you, baby.”

Maybe she’s right. Maybe I shouldn’t be thinking about her black lipstick on my skin.

After school the next day my hands are settled at the curve of Lisa’s waist, her fingers carding through my hair, her breath hot against my jaw. Dark makeup smears down my neck and across my collarbone, staining my fragile porcelain skin with her touch. Rabbit-quick heartbeats slow to a steady crawl.

I should go home. Each second I stay, I know I’m only making things worse, making Mom suspicious. Lisa’s bedroom is dark, the curtains drawn, the walls littered with sketches and band posters. They press in closer and closer the longer we lie here, limbs tangled, breathing gently.

But then she looks up at me, her gaze soft and pupils blown wide, and draws me into another kiss.

Mom doesn’t stop me in the kitchen this time, so I march right up the stairs and into my bedroom. I’m still untying my shoes when she appears in my doorway. She doesn’t bother to knock.

“Lisa’s again?”

Fuck. I should never have told her that. I could’ve lied. I should’ve lied.

“Yeah,” I say, not looking up at her. “We have math class together. She offered to help me since exams are coming up.”

It’s not a lie, technically. Lisa’s always been good with numbers; much better than me, at least. Somewhere buried in my closet there’s an old picture of us from the 5th grade mathletes finals, back when her hair was still curly and red and I still had braces stuck to my teeth. Mom scoffs anyway.

“I thought last year you told me you didn’t need to keep seeing your math tutor, baby.”

“I *don’t*,” I insist. “It’s just nice to have someone else to study with, you know?”

She’s not convinced. I finally pull my sneakers off, dropping them to the floor beside my bed. Mom grimaces, already bothered by the mess. “I just don’t want you getting distracted.”

Her touch turns me into something other, something real, the raw plasma of a burning star. Lisa’s chipped black nails peel back my skin and reveal every caged, visceral part of me. I piece myself back together and leave before her mom gets home from work, the smoldering, volatile thing inside me straining against its shell. I take the bus home, catching my reflection in the window. The girl who stares back at me is a stranger, an ill-fitting disguise, a cheap Halloween costume. Her curls pulled neatly out of her eyes, her features plastic and fake.

She looks so much more like my mother than me.

The dinner table that night is quiet, only broken by occasional idle chatter of my brothers squabbling with each other. For once our mother doesn't step in to reprimand them; her scrutinizing gaze fixed on me, her unruly, wayward daughter. Dad is tense, silent, picking at his food.

"So," my mother says, and I know this isn't going to end well,

"Ruby, how about you? How was school?"

"Fine," I say.

"Just fine?"

"Yeah," I answer with half a shrug, "Nothing really happened, so."

"Mhm," she says. "And after school? At a friend's house again?"

"Jeanette," my father warns. Mom shoots him a glare.

"No, no, I'm just asking," she insists, "I have the right to know where my daughter's running off to all the time, don't I?"

"Mom—"

"Baby, I know you're young, but that girl is—"

Something sharp and defensive rears its ugly head within me. "She's *what*, Mom?"

"*Don't* interrupt me, Ruby; I don't want to argue with you."

"Jeanette, *please*," Dad says again. He gives a brief nod to the boys, shooing them out of the dining room and up the stairs.

"Oh, would you *stop that*?" she snaps. "You're not worried about what kind of people your daughter is spending time with?"

“What kind of person is she, Mom?” I know what she means.

I want to hear her say it.

Admit it.

“She’s not like *you*, baby,” she says. “You’re a good kid—”

“You don’t know what I’m like,” I answer. “You don’t know anything about me.”

Mom looks hurt. I can’t bring myself to care, not when I know that every vile thing she wants to say about Lisa she would just as soon say about me if she knew what I am.

There’s something restless kicking at the inside of my ribs, tearing at this fragile skin of mine from the inside out. My instinct is to hold it back like I always do, to rewrap the bandage around this bleeding wound; but it thrashes, caged, throwing its weight against the brittle walls I’ve built to contain it. It’s then that I realize there’s no escaping what I am, no wrapping it in lace and satin and report cards and family dinners and dead-eyed smiles.

No more hiding. I take hold of it, pulling, tearing it raw and bloody from my chest. I want to show her exactly what I am.

I want to show her that maybe I’m not her daughter at all.