

Secret

Maddie sat on the stool, kicking her feet against the cabinet door. The dog sat at her feet expectantly for some scraps. His tail thwacked thwacked thwacked thwacked against the hardwood floor. Jeff stuck the knife in the jar of peanut butter and swirled it around. The organic brand had the tendency to separate with the oil migrating to the top. He dug out a healthy portion, scraping the glass bottom for strays. This wasn't what he would have bought himself. It tore at the fragile white bread and absorbed the strawberry jam, and had a grainy texture. Maddie had her arms folded and her head down, waiting for her dinner. He swirled his finger in the jar and pulled out a small heap of peanut butter, sticking it out to Maddie.

"Here," he smiled. She perked up, leaned over and put her mouth around his finger, licking the peanut butter clean. Her tongue clucked against the roof of her mouth. Jeff slid the sandwich over to her and poured a glass of milk.

"I don't like strawberry," she mumbled. Biting into the sandwich, the strawberry jam slid between her fingers and plopped onto the plate. She had a talent for making a mess within seconds when she ate.

"I eat blackberry at home," Jeff replied. He didn't tell her he was seventeen and hadn't had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in years. Instead he just watched her eat. Before each bite she looked at the sandwich to make sure of what she was eating. She grinned a peanut butter grin and wrapped her sticky fingers around the glass of milk, leaving smudges and fingerprints in her wake. Her gulping was loud. From the floor he heard the dog letting out a sigh, and he tossed a piece of bread to the floor. The dog lapped it up in two bites. He immediately looked up for more.

"Mommy doesn't let me feed him," Maddie gasped out. Some milk dribbled down her chin and Jeff wiped it off with a napkin.

"Don't worry," he smiled, "It'll be our secret, OK?"

Maddie nodded and tore at the other half of the sandwich. She liked her secrets with Jeff. "What time is mommy getting home?"

"She works later on Fridays, so not until after your bed time," he said, screwing the top back on the peanut butter. He wiped the crumbs off the counter with the worn out sponge.

"Can I stay up and wait for her?"

“Nope. Sorry, hun. She’d kill me.”

Maddie slumped down, finished the sandwich, and put the plate on the floor for the dog to lick. She smiled up at Jeff. She liked their secrets. He wet a paper towel and wiped at her hands, taking each finger and working the jam out of her cuticles. He could see her fingernails were getting long and would be able to leave scratch marks. “When did your mommy cut your nails?”

“I don’t remember,” she said with a hint of fear. “You won’t cut them, will you?”

Cutting her nails was a task he would easily surrender to her mother. Maddie hated getting her nails cut almost as much as she hated getting her hair cut. She wrenched her entire body away and dissolved into tears. He had taken her to the salon a few times until finally telling her mother he was never able to calm her down. She would cry out for her mommy the entire time. It worked Maddie up into a state he had never seen her in. She was only five but howled with the anger of a rabid mutt. “No I won’t cut them, you’re off the hook,” he soothed to her. When she was calm, she showed it in her entire body, her spine slumping, shoulders sagged. “Come on, let’s take the dog for a walk.”

The dog’s tail began thwacking again, recognizing his favorite word. Maddie clipped his leash on while Jeff grabbed her jacket. He pulled her hands through the arm holes. “Here,” he gestured. Putting her gloves on was tedious, making sure each finger was in. He helped her jam her feet into her snow boots, being too lazy to untie them. The security alarm was set, jacket on, scarf wrapped around his neck. Maddie opened the door and ran out.

The snow had thankfully stopped. The Christmas lights let off a delicate glow. Ice crunched under their boots, while the dog bounded into the snow banks left by the plow. “Hold on to him tight, Maddie.” Jeff took out his phone. Her mom would be home in two hours. Maddie still had to take a bath before bed. “Here, take my hand.” He slipped his gloved hand into hers. The dog commanded the lead. He sniffed the newly fallen snow, peeing small amounts every couple of feet. Maddie pointed at the house with the blow up Grinch in their front yard. She loved that cartoon. Jeff made a note to remember to bring it next time for her.

“Which house is yours?” Maddie asked. Her nose was turning a bright cherry red. He pointed down the street. “That way, hun. Just a few houses down.”

“Can we see it?” she was jumping excitedly. He hoped she didn’t slip on black ice.

“Oh, I dunno,” he teased.

“Please?” she dragged out the word.

“Oh, all right. You win.” She let out a small, ‘Yea!’ and they walked down the street. He led her away from the icy areas. His house was an olive green, with shutters the color of a ripe eggplant. “This is it, hun. What do you think?”

“It’s pretty. Do your mommy and daddy live here?”

“They do.”

“Which room is yours?”

He pointed at the upper left window. “That one, hun. With the red candle lights in the window.”

“Your room must be so neat.”

“I’ll show you one day. Come on, let’s head back.”

The dog was still wound with energy, able to go for hours. Jeff helped shake her jacket off when they got inside the house. Small drifts of snow settled onto the floor for the dog to lick up. She grabbed onto his shoulders for balance as she wiggled off her snow boots. Her bangs clung to her forehead, sweaty from the warm layers of clothing.

“I’m gonna feed the dog. Can you go upstairs and make the bath like I showed you?” Maddie nodded and looked at the ground. She hated taking baths. She hated cutting her nails, getting a haircut, and taking baths. “Ok, go start one, but don’t get in until I can supervise you, ok?” She shook her head again, eyes still on the floor, and made her way upstairs.

Back in the kitchen the dog was chasing its tail in circles, locking it in his mouth every few seconds only to release it. He stopped at the sound of the kibble spilling into the dish. Jeff poured too much, spilling onto the floor, which the dog happily licked up. The water had begun running upstairs. He checked his phone again. Her mom wouldn’t be home for an hour and a half. Making sure the front door was locked, he made his way upstairs.

“Maddie?” he knocked before opening the door. She was standing next to the tub, wrapped in only a towel. He turned the water off, feeling it; it was just right. “Thank you, Maddie. You did a good job.” He squeezed some shampoo in the water and mixed it with his hand making some bubbles. “Here you go.” He turned away as she stepped into the tub. Jeff turned around. “Ok, wash your hair like I showed you.” She grabbed the cup off the side and used it to pour water over her head. She lathered the shampoo into her hair, using only a small amount, just like he showed her. She smiled up at him. Now the fun part. She plugged her nose,

and went under the water. She shook her head back and forth, getting the suds out. She popped back up and he was already there, wiping her face with the towel. "That's my girl," he said.

He leaned back against the sink, watching her dunk the toy boat under. His phone said her mom would be home in a little over an hour. Remembering he locked the front door, he pulled his shirt over his head, dropping it on the cool tile below. Undid his belt, lowered his jeans, kicked them off. He dropped his boxers to the ground and shoved them to the side. Maddie was still playing with her boat. He tested the water with his toe. It was lukewarm, like soup left out too long. The water rippled with the newly added weight. Maddie looked up at him but looked back down at the boat. Jeff listened to the water lapping against the side of the tub. He reached out, brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. She kept her eyes on the boat. "This is our secret," he whispered.