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The Plights of Teddies and Chirpers

Mona trudged along the alley, letting Windy stop and sniff at every cluster of weeds or interesting pile of leaves. The summer sun was hot on her head where it shone through the gaps in the trees. Mona felt her shoulders slumping more with the humidity. She wiped some sweat off her forehead.

Stopping once again while Windy decided to sit and decipher a coded message from some other animal in the brush, Mona gazed at her neighbor's dark red sedan, parked behind their house. The teddy bear in the rear window was drooping. *It looks like it's dying from heat stroke*, Mona thought to herself, feeling a little sick in the stomach. *I wish I could take it inside in the AC*. Then she felt ridiculous. Imagine how short, unimaginative Mrs. Munde would stare at her if she walked up to the fence one day and just said, "Mrs. Munde, I think your teddy bear is suffocating inside your hot car. Could you please at least take him inside with you so he can cool off?" She wouldn't understand and probably think Mona was acting like a little kid, or was really weird, or something. *Maybe I am*, she thought. *I know I'm ridiculous, at least*.

Windy got up and walking again, ready to go home. She was a large shepherd/collie mix, and the strength of her pull as the leash stretched out between them made Mona stumble. "Wait, Windy!" she called, taking one last sympathetic look at the droopy bear as she stumbled behind her pet behemoth. They turned out of the alley and walked past the vegetable garden, which was fenced by tall hollyhocks. Windy came to a sudden stop.

“Windy, no!” Mona groaned as the dog started to chew on a stalk. “You know you’re supposed to eat only what we give you!” Windy looked up at her mournfully. “Oh, you,” Mona sighed, and rubbed her head.

They proceeded into the house, where the blast of air conditioning was a welcome relief. Mona filled the dog’s dish and then gulped down some water, noting the odd silence in the house. Then she remembered: Bertie was at the pool with friends.

Good, Mona thought. She’d just caught sight of a photo on the mantle in the living room and it had aroused that aching, angry feeling again. *I can write in my journal. I need to spill my guts.*

Walking slowly up the stairs, Mona tried to analyze the feeling in her belly. It wasn’t a stomachache. Stomach aches didn’t feel connected to the brain, and it was like her brain was sending pain to her stomach. But it also felt angry – like she wanted to throw something, or shout, to get ride of the feeling, only she didn’t know what to shout.

When she got to her room Mona closed her door for privacy, even though everyone else was out, and got out her journal. She carefully traced the silver moon engraved on the dark blue cover, as she did each time before she started writing. It was like some sort of prayer, or protection against having whatever she wrote somehow jinx her. *As if I’m not already jinxed enough*, she thought as she opened the journal.

August 12, Tuesday

Dear J.S.

Well, it's two weeks back home after THE INCIDENT and I still have that weird feeling in my stomach. Why won't it go away????

I guess maybe if I tell you what really happened, it'll hurt enough that it will work itself out. Maybe I'll give that a try.

Okay, well, you know I was at music camp. And, well, for the end we had to compose our own piece for the concert and perform it. And I really *liked* writing my piece, J.S.! It felt all flowy, but also like I was being intelligent *and* clever, like both solving and creating a puzzle. So, I guess I was proud of it. Okay? Fine. I know pride goes before a fall and whatnot, but I was.

What happened that night I don't understand, and it still hurts to think about it. I mean, I've done recitals before. I was in the last group, and I'd practiced for hours. So, they called my name and...

"Mona! Mona, we're home! Guess what I did at the pool!" Bertie yelled, bursting the door open and standing, having clearly pulled her shorts and t-shirt over a sopping wet swimming suit, as the puddle forming around her feet implied.

"Guess what trick I did!" Bertie exclaimed again when she saw Mona looking. So, I was on the water slide and I..."

The angry feeling flared up in Mona and she almost choked. She stood up very suddenly from her bed and, a horrible howl scowl on her face, said, "Bertie! WHAT did I say

about coming into my room without knocking! You are so --- aarrgh --,” she couldn’t find the right word, “so *rude!*”

Bertie, who had been waving her hands in the air in explanation, dropped her arms to her side, her mouth hanging open. The blue goggles strapped to the top of her head made her look like some sort of bubbly alien. For some reason, this made Mona even more furious. She clenched her fist and held up her blue fountain pen in the other.

“If you come in without knocking again,” she growled furiously, shaking her pen and dripping a few ink drops on the floor, “I will take this pen and write things YOU don’t understand all over your Teddy Treasures teddies’ faces. *Every single one of them.*” She squinted menacingly.

“No, no, you wouldn’t! Don’t touch my teddies!” Bertie trembled, tears starting in her eyes.

Mona was still caught in that painful rage. She took another step toward her sister, “One. More. Time...”

Bertie backed out of the doorway and ran down the hall to her room, leaving wet spots behind her. Mona slammed her door shut plunked herself back down on her bed, still seething. She glanced at the journal – luckily facing downwards on the covers, she realized – and let out a huge, blustery sigh. *So much for that plan*, she thought. The urge to spill was gone, and she hadn’t even finished an entry. Mona hated that, but she didn’t want to deal with it right now. She didn’t want to deal with any of it anymore right now.

Laying back on her bed, she closed her eyes. She thought she could hear a faint voice through the walls saying, “Don’t worry, Cupcake. You’ll be safe...” as she drifted off into a suddenly exhausted sleep...

In her room, Bertie, still in goggles, was carefully checking each of her beloved Teddy Treasures teddies. Even though she was nine, she still loved to touch them, admire the special treasure she held, and display them. “They’re *collectibles*,” she would explain happily to friends who came over. “Dad says it’s good to collect. Someday, they can be really valuable!” In her heart, Bertie knew she would never, *never*, sell her teddies, but it made her feel important when she said it. After all, she was going to start fourth grade – an important year.

Bertie sniffed as she looked at Cupcake, the first bear she’d gotten. It was a sweet bear with a bow by its ear, holding out an enticing strawberry cupcake. “Don’t worry, Cupcake,” Bertie gulped. “You’ll be safe up here.” She placed her last bear up on top of her wardrobe, balancing on her desk chair. For safety, she had decided to move her collection from the top of her chest of drawers to somewhere out of reach of certain peoples’ hands.

Bertie got down from the chair and sat on her little window seat, looking outside. It was still light out, even after a whole day at the pool. *Maybe Mona wanted to come with us*, Bertie thought. *Maybe I should ask if she wants tomorrow and see my trick! That would make her laugh!* Bertie smiled again as she remembered the rush of the water slide and how, at the last minute, she’d spread her legs and arms wide apart, gripping the sides and, as she reached the end of the chute, had pulled them back in and done an awesome cannonball into the pool! Everyone had clapped: it felt great!

“Splash!” Bertie said out loud as she relived the scene. “Whoosh, ha ha!” she was laughing and bouncing on the seat, eyes, closed, so she didn’t hear her mother at first as she said,

“Bertie, Bertie honey, can I ask you a question?”

“Look out BELOW!!!!” Bertie yelled, her eyes still closed. Somehow, she was standing on her bed. She bent her knees, poised for the jump! The finale! “Here I cooomme...”

“Whoa ho, there, my chirp bird,” said a low voice, and Bertie opened her eyes to find herself looking up at her father’s beard from his arms, where he had caught her before she could hit the floor.

“Dad!” she said, putting her arms out to give him a big squeeze. He hugged her back and turned around.

“Mommy!” Bertie said. “I thought you were working late!”

Bertie’s mother smiled. “Well, I was, but it *is* almost dinner time, and that, you know is more important.”

“Mmm hmm,” Bertie agreed as her father put her on her feet. Then she noticed both her parents looking at her with serious expressions.

“What?” she asked nervously, pulling at her curls. That hurt, and she reached up and felt her goggles strapping her hair down tight. She pulled them off and swung them back and forth, looking from her mom to her dad and back again. “I didn’t do a *big* cannonball,” she promised. “It was only at the end, and it was the shorter slide!”

Her parents glanced at each other. Her dad said, “Bertie, that’s fine. We can talk about the cannonball later. Right now,” he took a breath, “we just want to ask you a question.” Bertie looked at him blankly. “About your sister,” he concluded.

“Oh,” Bertie said, feeling even more nervous. “Um, she wasn’t with us,” she tried, hoping that would end the situation.

“Bertie, come here,” her mother said, leading her back to her bed. They all three sat down.

“We just want to know what happened today,” her mother continued. “When we came home, we heard Mona crying. She wouldn’t open the door and yelled something about people ruining her “alone time.”

“And she growled at me,” added her dad, making a scared face that caused Bertie to giggle just a little.

“So,” said Dr. Windle said, after giving her husband a pointed look, “we just want to know if anything went wrong. Can you tell us?” She smoothed Bertie’s still-damp curls away from her face.

Bertie sucked in her breath and looked up at her teddy bears. They smiled down at her. Bertie wasn’t a rat, but she also wasn’t going to let Mona walk all over her!

“Well, I went to the pool,” she began, “and then when I came home Mona was in her room, so I opened the door to tell her about this really cool trick I did and, and…” she stopped, remembering the look on Mona’s face, the horrible howl scowl.

“And?” her dad asked?

“Well,” Bertie squirmed a little. “I guess she was writing in that book, because she got really mad and shook that pen at me – you know, the one that drips?” She looked up at her mom, who nodded. “Well, she shook the pen, and yelled, and said if I ever came in without knocking again, she would… would write on my teddies faces!” she concluded in a rush!

“Mommy, she was *really* mad!”

Her mom pulled her into a hug, but there was a worried frown on her face. Bertie peeked at her dad: he was frowning, too.

“Well,” Mr. Windle said. “She is right Bertie, about one thing.” Bertie looked at him questioningly. “You *should* knock first,” he answered.

“But – but we always just come in and talk to each other. We’ve always done that!” Bertie exclaimed. “She never minded... well, until recently.... umm...I guess she *did* tell me to knock when I came in last week to show her that weird rock Francis and I found...” she was frowning now, confused. Was that the first time Mona had told her to knock? She couldn’t remember.

Dr. Windle took her daughter’s hand and held it. “It’s like when I’m in my office at home, Bertie. I need the quiet so I can concentrate on my writing. You always knock on my door first.”

“Yes, but you’re a grown up. You’re *working*,” Bertie explained sensibly. Her blue-green eyes looked a little pleading. “Mona’s not *working*,” she pressed.

“Honey,” her mom said, “sometimes, everyone needs some space. And I think Mona *is* working right now,” she added, softly. “

“She is?” Bertie asked.

“Well,” amended Mr. Windle, “let’s say she’s working *through* some things.”

“What things?”

Dr. Windle looked down at her younger daughter and smiled, but the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I think it should be Mona who tells you that.” Then, seeing that Bertie looked worried, she said, “Don’t worry, little bird. She’s okay.”

Bertie glanced between her mom and dad and said, in a small voice, “Was it me? Is she mad because I went to the pool without her?” She looked sadly at her dad. “She can come

tomorrow! We can go tomorrow, too! It's just that Janie asked me and then they were all at the door, and Mommy said I could go, so I did."

Mr. Windle ruffled her hair. "No, Bertie, that was fine. You are allowed to have fun with your friends. Mona could have gone if she wanted to. I just think Mona doesn't want to be around people much, right now."

"Oh," said Bertie. Her stomach felt a little hollow. She looked down. Then her stomach rumbled.

"Mommy, I'm hungry!" Bertie said. She wanted to get out of her room, which was starting to feel hot, and go outside. She had peeked in the fridge earlier and there had been a big, fat, juicy watermelon there. That sounded perfect, right about now.

"Okay, okay. Let's go down and take the food out to the patio," her mom said.

Bertie jumped off the bed and headed toward the hall,

"But Bertie," Dr. Windle said as she and her husband caught up with her, "promise to knock at closed doors, first."

"Always a good rule of thumb," Mr. Windle added, chuckling.

"Okay, okay. I'll knock at closed doors." Suddenly, Bertie giggled, looking up at her dad, with his soft brown beard and his warm smile. "I guess it's *especially* important if it's the bathroom door!"

"Indeed," Mr. Windle replied, inclining his head toward her in agreement. All three laughed as they made their way toward the stairs. But as they passed Mona's room, Bertie stopped laughing, because there was something new there. It was a sign.

Bertie paused to read it as her parents headed downstairs. It was written in big block letters and heavy colors, and it said,

Mona's Room

Private!

Then, in smaller letters, at the bottom, it said,

If you *must* see me, please

KNOCK FIRST!

And, in even smaller letters, written in that same drippy blue ink, it concluded,

Especially chirpers!

Bertie stared at the last line and felt a few tears welling up. She wiped her eyes furiously, turned away, and plodded down to the kitchen, where her mother had just finished slicing the watermelon.

“Oh, there you are,” she said cheerfully. “Bertie, can you take this plate out to the patio table? It would be a big help!” She smiled.

Bertie smiled back bravely. She loved her mom's smile. It was always so bright and made her think of sunny days. She took the platter and headed to the back yard. As she set the watermelon down, she heard a bird singing and looked toward the maple tree. The bluebird was there again!

Bertie tiptoed over the soft grass toward her swing that was tied to one of the maple's branches. She sat down and looked up. The bluebird was still there. He seemed to look at her and let out a "Whee chee hee hee, whee hee heep!" Bertie grinned and chirped back at him, slowly starting to swing. Maybe chirpers weren't allowed in Mona's room, but they sure were here. *And there's no knocking, Bertie thought. Everyone's welcome at this tree!*

Whee chee hep, whee hee!" agreed the bluebird.