

A Clean Slate

by Tracy Balanik

She awakens. She is stiff from the hard bed, and the dampness of the open room chills her to the bone. The air smells of a combination of disinfectant and urine, both of which burn her eyes and nasal passages. She is hungry and has to pee. Looking around the space, she doesn't know how either of these basic needs are going to be met. The floor is cement, the non-existent walls, bars and wire mesh reveal no bathroom accommodations. In the cell next to hers, she sees that the occupant couldn't hold their bladder and has had to pee on the floor. A trickle of urine creeps from the puddle towards a drain, obviously designed for this purpose.

She knows there are others here too. She hears a cacophony of yelling, crying, and moaning. How did she get here? She searches her memory. The last thing she can recall was falling asleep in front of the TV.

In the distance, she hears voices. She strains to hear what they are saying, but they are speaking in a language she doesn't understand. All she can make out is her name.

Footsteps crunching on gravel.

A jingle of keys and the lock holding the door closed pops open. She only understands a few words, "Rylie" and "pee." His voice is friendly enough, almost sing-song. Talking about having to go to the bathroom makes Rylie need to go that much more. She tries to dart past the man, but this is anticipated and she is blocked, knocking her back on her butt. Her captor secures a restraint and firmly leads her out of the cell. "Ok, let's go," his tone, not as friendly now.

Rylie is lead past a row of cells.

"Hey, what did you do?" a deep voice yells.

"Can't be good," another says.

From the last one, taunting laughter, as he ravages the wire mesh trying to get at her.

Rylie's pace quickens as she tries to ignore their voices. She only has one thing on her mind now, to get relief. Finally, the bathroom. No privacy though, as the guard watches, at this point, she doesn't care.

She is returned to her room, her breakfast is waiting. It's edible. While she eats, she tries to piece together how she ended up here. Where was her family? Were they safe? Her memory is blank, could she have been drugged?

A different captor enters her cell, from the opposite side. Seeing that Rylie has finished her breakfast, he takes her dish and offers some water. Rylie drinks gratefully.

The man speaks to Rylie as though she understands. Although the dialect is familiar she struggles to get the gist of even a few words. Finally, realizing that Rylie doesn't understand, he motions and then leads her out of the room to a different part of the building. More and more people appear, staring at her and whispering, and then, she is surrounded.

It's a trap, but Rylie is too late in her comprehension. Three of them grab her, pulling, pushing and dragging her. Rylie struggles and screams, even biting one of her attackers. And then she is thrown into a tub of water. Her head goes beneath the surface; is she going to be drowned? When she comes up for air, the assault is over and she knows that there is no use fighting anymore. She must endure the next thirty minutes as they dump chemicals and water on her skin — the last of her dignity washes down the drain.

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Later, back in her cell, Rylie focuses on her escape. She has determined that there is no way out without a key. All she can do is watch and wait to find out what will happen next.

She looks at the lone occupant of the cell next to hers. The small figure is huddled in the corner, softly crying. Rylie can see that he is no more than an adolescent.

"Hey, it's okay. What's your name? I'm Rylie," she says, not sure how to start or what to say to be of comfort.

"I'M SORRY, I WON'T DO IT AGAIN!" he shouts out to no one in particular, and then starts crying louder.

Someone yells from one of the other cells, "SHUT UP!"

Immediately the youth's sobs soften again and he turns his back to her. Rylie knows now that she is truly on her own.

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Time goes by, Rylie has no idea how long.

Three guards enter the hallway from a door to the left of her cell and start unlocking all the cell doors. Pandemonium erupts as everyone starts yelling at once.

"Ok, let's go."

As her cell doors swings open, Rylie momentarily thinks she is being set free. Her fellow prisoners form a quasi line, everyone jostling for a position. The door at the opposite end of the hall opens, but to Rylie's disappointment, it is just a fenced yard. The rest of the captives bolt, running as though there is somewhere to go. Rylie walks out slowly, the sun making her squint. She takes it all in, evaluating her surroundings. There are trees and grass and some exercise equipment. Some of the inmates and guards too, are already tossing a ball around.

Rylie finds a spot away from the commotion. The warmth of the sun's glow takes away the dampness of her cement imprisonment. A few minutes later another captive, older than herself, comes by and settles a few feet away. As they watch the antics in the yard, her silent companion seems to be waiting for something. Unexpectedly, she gets up and walks over to a gate. A person on the other side opens it and they walk off the grounds together, disappearing down the road.

"HEY, OVER HERE!" yells the young lad from before.

Rylie thinks he might be calling to her. Forgetting his sadness, he has joined in the game of ball with the others. But no, he is calling to someone on the other side of the fence. Rylie sees three people. They are waving and yelling back to him. He runs over and they open the gate to greet him. They are happy and hugging each other. Again, Rylie hears him say, "I'm sorry, I won't do it again."

"Do what?" she wonders. Is this why she is here? Did she do something wrong? Why can't she remember?

Yard time ends and the guards escort everyone back to their chambers. The youngster is gone now, his room empty. Rylie notices, though, that the older lady from before is back and asleep on her bed.

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Rylie feels extraordinarily sluggish when she wakes the next day. No breakfast is offered. A guard unlocks her door and leads her out through the building and to the parking lot. When they get to a windowless van, he motions for her to get in, she complies.

The ride is short. The door of the van opens. Rylie immediately recognizes the building and is relieved to know she isn't far from her own home.

Without a word to her, the guard again motions her out of the vehicle and escorts her into the building.

Rylie watches as the guard confers with the staff. They whisper back and forth — this time she hears words that she understands — 'bad' 'bite'. Everyone is looking at her now — everyone. For some unknown reason, she feels embarrassed and ashamed. She lowers her eyes to the floor.

Hurriedly now, the guard and two staff members usher her out of the reception area, down a long corridor to a room at the back of the building. A strong smell of antiseptic brings back a distant memory. Instantly, she knows what is about happen and puts on the brakes, trying to resist — but it's too late. More people appear and now they are carrying her. As much as she struggles, it is hopeless. She is forced down on a hard metal table and a mask is put over her face. The room goes dark.

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When she wakes she is back in her room. Her head is pounding. Everything feels wonky. Her mouth is sore. Feeling around with her tongue she notices some of her teeth are gone.

"It's about time you woke up," says a deep voice from the chamber next to hers.

She looks over to see she has a new neighbour.

"How long has it been?" she asks.

"I don't know. Time is funny. You were here when we got back from yard time and dinner hasn't been served yet. You do the math," he said.

"I need some water," Rylie says looking around to see if they had left any for her.

"Yeah, that's how I feel too, when I come back from 'the clinic'," he says. Finally, somebody that knows what is going on!

"What is this place?" Rylie asks.

"You don't know?" he says, surprised.

"No, I just woke up and I was here."

"We veterans call it 'New Beginnings'. It's a place to start over and get a clean slate," he says.

"I'm Charlie by the way."

"Rylie" she says.

She's about to ask more questions when five strangers enter the hallway from the left and start opening up doors. Not hers this time.

"Looks like I'm getting out for some more fresh air," he says. The five handlers go through the necessary procedures, and escort five prisoners out the door that leads to the yard.

What was going on? Rylie is more confused than ever. Where was her family? She misses them so much. She feels exhausted from the day's events and falls back to sleep.

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During yard time the next day, Rylie looks for Charlie. He is hanging out with some of his boys. She goes over to the group and they introduce themselves, then she and Charlie find a private spot.

"I got some intel," he says once they are both comfortable. "You're not going to like it."

"What?" she says. "Tell me."

"The word is, your family brought you here," he says. "They say your behaviour has been 'unacceptable' and they can't take it anymore."

"My behaviour?" she says. "I don't understand. What did they say I did?"

"You've had accidents in the house when they weren't home. And, you bit one of the children," he says.

"BIT one of the children! I would never do that," she says.

"They also said that you can be aggressive and bite ... your own kind," he says looking away.

Rylie is in disbelief. "All of that is just not true. This is all a mistake. There has got to be a way to get back to them and prove that they are wrong!" After a minute he says, "Well, that's just it. They don't want you back. You are here to find a new family."

Rylie is heart broken by this information. A new family? She doesn't want a new family.

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The next day, a guard and an unfamiliar female open her cage door. She is taken for a walk outside the grounds, on a path in a wooded area. The smell of pine and dirt, brings back memories of adventures with her family. Afterwards, instead of being taken back to her cage, they enter through the front door. She waits as the people talk, then back out the front door and to a car.

After a short ride, they arrive at their destination.

She is led into a home, not unlike the one she remembers. The lady shows her around. After dinner, Rylie settles on a fluffy bed by the woodstove. The lady brushes her coat and gives her some pats on her head.

Rylie closes her eyes, and wonders if this could be a dream. Then she hears, "Meow?"

Author's Note: The inspiration for this story is gleaned from my experience volunteering at the Nanaimo SPCA, where I met and adopted Goldie, a 4 year old golden retriever/cocker spaniel cross. Whatever the reasons were for her being at the SPCA, she really did get a clean slate when she joined our family. She was a very special dog.