

Makeup

“This has to be perfect,” I say.

Misti squirms in her chair as I try to add more makeup, causing me to smear the navy eye shadow all over her cheeks instead of on her eyelids. “Why do you keep doing that?” I snap. “Don’t you want to look pretty?”

“That stuff’s gross,” Misti groans, wiping her hand across the mess of makeup on her cheek, which only makes it look even worse.

I take the damp face cloth from the edge of the sink and carefully wipe my sister’s face and hands. The cloth is already stained with a million sparkling shades of blue, silver, and pink, the remnants of my past failed makeup schemes for Misti. When she is finally cleaned up, she leaps out of the dining room chair set up in the bathroom and runs off.

I sigh, turning on the water in the sink and rinsing out the cloth. Misti doesn’t understand yet. She’s nine years old and she still thinks that playing outside is more important than makeup and beauty. The other girls that are her age have started experimenting with other people’s makeup, but she seems to have no interest in it.

I toss the still-stained cloth down the laundry chute and head downstairs, flicking droplets of water from my hands as I go.

Mom stands in the kitchen, trying to figure out the instructions printed on the back of some kind of just-add-water meal package. “Hey Kayleigh,” she calls out.

“Hey,” I shout back.

“What were you and Misti up to up there?”

“I was trying to help her with her makeup again.”

“I don’t think you should push her into the makeup so much,” Mom says, looking out of the kitchen at me with a grease-covered face. “She’s only nine years old. Makeup can actually make kids that young look worse. It’s disgusting when little kids pile the makeup on like you’re trying to pile it on Misti.”

I roll my eyes before collapsing onto the couch. I slip a pair of wireless ear buds into my ears and pick up my little black tablet. I turn it on and the screen lights up excitedly. I flick through the covers of magazines and television shows, letting my mind wander. Suddenly, the thing starts vibrating in my hand and I press a small green button that flashes in the bottom right corner. “Hi, Nat,” I say. “What’s up?”

My friend Natalie’s face fills the small screen and I place the tablet on a thin metallic stand that reaches like a branch from the coffee table. “You *have* to help me,” Natalie whines. “I’m just going to *die* if you don’t get over here soon.”

“What is it this time?” I ask with a smile, slumping backwards into the couch.

“It’s the party,” Natalie replies, her lip sticking out in a pout. “Dominique wants me to organize the annual New Year’s Eve party for the school, but I’m *so* in over my head.”

“Nat, it’s like, almost December,” I say quickly, sitting up straight. “You should have started preparing before now.” The popular girls at school throw a massive New Year’s Eve party every year, and every year they stick some poor popular girl wannabe with the planning. It’s a bit mean, but the wannabe somehow always manages to throw a great party.

“I know,” Natalie whines again. “I want to bring in 2035 with style, but everything is just piling up around me. I haven’t even *thought* about what I’m going to wear.”

I roll my eyes. I've had my dress for this party for weeks now, carefully tucked away in my closet. I know what colour my nails are going to be and what my makeup will look like. Barring any major fashion changes, I have everything ready to go. That's what it takes to look good at a party; weeks and months of planning.

I chat with Natalie for a few minutes, giving her some tips on what decorations to get. Finally, I click off the tablet and sigh, removing the ear buds.

Mom stumbles out of the kitchen, her face greasy and full of what looks like flour. Who uses flour anymore? She smiles and triumphantly holds out a pan of mush that looks and smells like a cross between pizza and oatmeal. I don't know what it's supposed to be, but I can guess that the picture on the front of the package looks nothing like this... stuff.

"Okay, so we're obviously not going to eat that thing," I say to her. "Can we go out for sushi?"

"Oh, come on, Kayleigh," she says with a smile. "I worked hard on this. It's not as bad as it looks, I promise." She pokes a giant spoon into the mush and scoops it happily into her mouth. As soon as she does, though, she gags and starts running to the kitchen, dropping the disaster meal on the floor. I can hear her spit the mush into the sink.

"Okay," she calls out to me. "Sushi it is."

I stare at the mirror, carefully swiping more of the midnight blue eye shadow across my lids before applying silver lipstick. I adjust the strap on my one-shoulder top and smile at the reflection.

Misti's round face appears in one corner of the mirror. "Why do you use makeup?" she asks in her high pitched nine-year-old voice.

I sigh, placing the makeup brush down on the counter. “I use makeup so that I can look pretty,” I say calmly, even though I have explained this to her a thousand times before. “Every girl needs to wear makeup so she can make an impression. People remember a pretty face.”

“Why are you putting it on now?” she asks. “You don’t need to make an impression for me and Mommy. We already know you.”

“I still want to look pretty,” I say with a shrug.

“You are pretty, Kayleigh,” Misti whispers. She takes one look at the piles of makeup everywhere and turns around. “But you’re prettier when you don’t have that stuff all over your face.”

I sigh as she leaves. She doesn’t understand yet, but one day she will. One day she’ll know what it really takes to be pretty.

I lay my tablet on my desk, flicking through pictures in a magazine. Each screen that passes whispers a different story, tells me another way to look more beautiful. I don’t know why the teachers keep lecturing us about their uselessness.

“Hey, Kay,” Natalie says, slipping into the seat in front of me. She frowns at my tablet. “You’re not doing homework or something, are you?”

I turn the tablet around so she can see the picture. “I have my French assignment in a different tab,” I say. “If a teacher comes by, I’ll just flick into that.”

Natalie nods and I continue to flip through the pictures. “Look at her eye shadow,” she says suddenly, stopping me at a photo of a tall, skinny, blonde model with navy eye shadow covering every bit of skin between her eyebrow and cheek.

I nod. "Can you imagine how long it would take to get that to be perfect?" I wonder out loud.

"Yeah," Natalie says. "But can you imagine how many guys would be chasing after you if you did manage to pull it off?"

"Hey baby," a voice comes suddenly. My boyfriend Grayson slips into the seat next to me and places a gentle kiss on my cheek. "You look great."

Natalie giggles and I smile. "Do I look pretty?" I ask. Every day starts with the same question, the same reassurance from the same guy that all of my hard work is paying off.

He nods and takes my hand in his own. I feel a grin burst out on my face. *I'm pretty, I think. I'm pretty and that's all that matters.*

I return home, placing my tablet on its stand and running upstairs to apply a little bit more lipstick and face powder. When I walk into the bathroom, though, I'm shocked to see Misti at the sink, examining herself in the mirror.

She turns around to face me and it takes everything in me not to burst out laughing. Silver powder covers every inch of skin on her face and bright pink lipstick that I haven't liked or used since I was about five heavily lines her lips. Navy eye shadow covers not only her eyelids but also some of her nose and forehead.

"So I see you decided to give makeup a try," I say, trying not to giggle.

"Do I look pretty?" Misti asks suddenly, ignoring my sarcastic remark. Her tiny face looks anxious as she examines her reflection. She looks... desperate. I realize at that moment how much she wants me to say yes.

I sigh. “You look pretty,” I say. Her face lights up with a grin. “But, if you want, I can help you even it out.”

Misti nods, lowering the toilet lid and hopping onto it. Her clown-like face watches me expectantly, but I don’t even know where to start. I grab a wash cloth from the shelf behind me and wet it in the sink.

I take the dripping cloth and sit on the edge of bathtub facing Misti. I lift the cloth to begin washing away the poorly applied makeup, but she pulls away from me. “What are you doing?” she asks, her voice quivering. “I thought you said you were just going to even it out.”

“You put on too much,” I say. “I have to take it off and start over. But don’t worry; you did great for your first try. You should have seen me the first time I tried using makeup.” I laugh just for good measure. The first time I tried using makeup, I studied a magazine and took three hours creating a cosmetic masterpiece, but there’s no need to tell Misti that.

I lift the cloth again and press it against a clump of silver powder clinging to Misti’s cheek. She winces as the mass of makeup falls to the bathroom floor.

I gasp. The skin underneath the makeup is bruised and bleeding. I quickly wash the rest of the makeup off, causing Misti to wince, squirm, and yelp. When I finally finish, I toss the cloth into the sink and grab Misti’s face with both hands.

Her entire face is red, but that’s mostly from me scrubbing the wash cloth against her fragile skin. One eye is black and there are two or three bruises on her cheeks. Misti turns her head to avoid looking at me. I push up the sleeves of her shirt and find more bruises.

“Misti,” I whisper. “What happened?”

“It was nothing,” Misti whispers back. “It was just some girls at school. They said...” Her voice falters for a moment. “They told me I wasn’t pretty.”

I take her hand and drag her to the sink, helping to clean the blood from her cheeks. It takes a lot of begging on her part, but she finally convinces me to help her to cover the black eye with a heavy covering of eye shadow. I stretch the pattern past the corners of her eyes like the girl in the magazine I was reading in school to make the makeup look slightly less suspicious.

“I should do this more often,” Misti says with a shy smile, examining her reflection.

“I thought you didn’t like makeup,” I say, turning her face back to me so I can finish up the look with some sparkly lip gloss. Mom was right, the makeup doesn’t look quite right on Misti, it makes her look old and fake.

Misti frowns at the mirror. “I don’t like it,” she says. “But every girl needs makeup, right? I need to make a good impression.” She flashes a fake, toothy smile at the mirror.

I feel tears rising to my eyes. Since when are there mean popular girls in Misti’s life? Since when do nine-year-old girls get into fistfights over “prettiness”? Since when do they exchange blows because of how much makeup they’re wearing?

I can’t focus in school the next day. I feel defeated and discouraged. I’m wearing a lot less makeup than I usually do because just looking at all the eye shadow and lipstick made me feel sick to my stomach. All I could picture was Misti’s little face, broken and

bleeding underneath layers upon layers of makeup. I could only force myself to put on some mascara, a little bit of shimmering skin powder and some clear lip gloss that belonged to my Mom a long time ago before bolting out of the bathroom.

“You look like a mess,” Natalie says, plopping down into the seat in front of me. Her face powder is piled on, her eyes hidden behind eye shadow, her lips concealed under a phoney-looking shade of bright pink.

I force myself to smile at the playful insult.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “You’re usually the fashion expert when it comes to makeup.”

I shrug. “Simple can be beautiful,” I mutter pathetically.

Grayson sits next to me and examines my face. “You look different,” he says. “You’re wearing less makeup.”

I nod, unsure of what to say.

“What do you think?” Natalie chirps enthusiastically. I breathe a sigh of relief at the rescue. “She’s doing the whole ‘simple is beautiful’ thing.”

Grayson shrugs. “I’m used to seeing you with more makeup, that all,” he says.

“But do you like it?” I ask. “Do you still think I’m beautiful?”

Grayson hesitates before shrugging again. “What you want to do with your face is your business I guess.”

“But do you still think I’m beautiful?”

“You look fine,” he says defensively. “It’s okay for today, but maybe you should wear your normal makeup tomorrow.”

When the final tone rings, signalling the end of the day, I drag Grayson out into the hallway. “What was that in first class today?” I snap. “How could you tell me I’m not beautiful?”

“I didn’t say that,” Grayson snaps back.

“You didn’t say that I was,” I say, feeling like I’m about to break. “That’s just as bad.”

“Listen,” Grayson says. “I don’t know what’s going on in your life. I don’t know if you’re feeling stressed or if you just woke up late this morning, but the truth is that you don’t look as good today as you usually do, that’s all. You’ll look and feel better if you stick with the full face of makeup.”

“So you think that I’m not beautiful without makeup?”

“I think you would be happier with the makeup. You would make a better impression. You would be a little bit more...”

“Beautiful?”

“Yes, okay, fine,” Grayson says, throwing his hands into the air. “You would be more beautiful. Don’t get upset by that. It’s not just you, all girls look better with makeup and all guys want their girls to wear makeup. That’s just the way things work.”

I pause for a minute. “If... if I decided that I would never wear makeup again, what would you think?” I ask quietly.

Grayson twists his mouth around like he has just bitten into a lemon. “I would wonder why you would want to do that,” he says. “I probably... I probably wouldn’t want to be the only guy around with a strange looking girlfriend.”

I feel tears rising to my eyes and a lump in my throat. “Not wearing makeup wouldn’t make me look strange,” I whisper, trying to keep my voice from shaking. “It would make me look *natural*. I would be... I would be prettier without that stuff all over my face.” I laugh a little bit. Maybe Misti knows more than I realize. Maybe *I’m* the one who doesn’t understand what it means to be pretty.

Grayson grabs my hand. “But we don’t need to worry about that, right?” he asks, leaning his face against mine.

I push him away. “No,” I say. “We don’t need to worry about that.”

“Yeah, you would never go two days without makeup,” he says with a smile.

“That’s not it,” I say. “It’s over between us. We don’t need to worry about facing the world as a couple, because we’re not going to be a couple anymore. I’m going to be what I want to be, Grayson, not what the world wants me to be. I want someone who will always tell me I’m beautiful, with or without makeup.”

I turn around and walk away, holding my head higher than I ever have before. I resist the urge to look back, but just thinking about the look on Grayson’s face right now makes me smile.

I burst through the door of my house. Misti sits on the couch, flicking through screens on her little pink tablet. Makeup covers her face in globs. I sit down next to her, observing the pictures of tall, thin models covered in shimmering powder and pounds of makeup.

In one motion I turn off the tablet and grab Misti’s hand. I pull her upstairs to the bathroom and grab the stained face cloth from the shelf. I soak it in the sink for a minute

before wiping all of the makeup off of Misti's face. She squirms and yelps, but I keep going until all of the eye shadow, lipstick and powder goes down the drain.

“What was that for?” Misti asks. Her face is once again red from the scrubbing and her black eye seems to shine, but, in some weird way, she has never looked better.

I lunge forward and hug her. “You're beautiful,” I whisper. “You're the prettiest girl in the world. You don't need any makeup.”

“Um, Kayleigh,” Misti says. “Are you okay?”

I laugh. “I'm fine,” I say. “I'm great. I feel better than I ever have before in my life.”

“Okay, Kayleigh, I think you should go see a doctor or something.”

I laugh again as I pull out of the hug. “We don't need makeup, do we?” I ask, looking at Misti and taking her face in my hands. “We're pretty without all that stuff, right?”

Misti finally catches on and smiles. She leaps in for a second hug. “We're beautiful,” she whispers in agreement. “You're beautiful.”

I don't need magazines to tell me how to look pretty. I don't need a boyfriend who brags about my physical appearance but doesn't care about who I really am. I don't need makeup. All I need is my family.

I still wear makeup every now and then. It's fun to play around with the colours, textures and sparkles, but I no longer feel like I need it to feel pretty. I have learned to laugh at the girls in the magazines and Misti and I sometimes sit on the couch and point out the impracticality of the models' appearances.

All it took was one discouraging conversation with my boyfriend to change my view on beauty. Grayson has a new girlfriend now, one who wears more makeup than I ever did, hiding every little mark and quirk that she calls an imperfection under pounds of cosmetics.

Misti has more confidence than ever. She sometimes puts sparkles on her skin for fun, too, but she still doesn't wear makeup on a regular basis. I don't think she ever will.

I still own a makeup case. I still own eye shadow, lipstick, and shimmering powder. I still own makeup. The important thing is that makeup doesn't own me anymore.