

**PRETTY
LITTLE
THINGS**

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PROLOGUE

A small, portly man in a white suit, deep purple shirt and patent slip-ons ran around the stage with a microphone in hand, reaching out to touch any one of the hundreds of sweaty palms that waved back and forth before him in the Unity Tree of Everlasting Evangelical Life church auditorium. He slicked back a thick band of gelled gray hair that had broken form and swooped down across his forehead and over his eyes. The amazing camera work practically let you count the fine lines in the preacher's full face, the beads of perspiration rolling off his red cheeks and down through layers of neck fat.

"Now when Moses went to meet the Israelites after their victory over the Midianites," the preacher boomed as he worked the stage from one end to the other, "he had all the princes and the priest, Eleazar, with him. And he sees what? What does he see that the Bible tells us made Moses so incredibly angry? He sees *women!*" The crowd, which looked to be made up of mostly females, booed loudly.

Seated in front of the living room TV in his worn, comfortable La-Z-Boy, the man nodded along with the church audience, watching the drama unfold on his television screen as though he had not already seen this video a hundred times before.

"The Israelites have saved the *women!*" the preacher boomed. "And Moses, well, he says, 'So you've spared all the women? *Why?* Why, when they're the very ones who have caused a plague to strike the Lord's people! Why did you spare them?'"

Somewhere in the church audience, a female yelled, "Because they were men!"

The preacher laughed. “Yes! Because they were men. And because they were men, they were weak to the ways of women! To the smell of a woman and the taste of a woman and the feel of a woman!”

The man wiped his sweaty palm on the recliner’s worn armrest, nodding enthusiastically at the preacher’s words.

“They were *weak!*” the preacher continued. “And so these weak men spared these vile women who had wreaked havoc on their tribe. But Moses is not just upset, ladies and gentlemen. He doesn’t just say, ‘That was a stupid thing to do!’ and leave it at that. No. Moses knows what will happen now that these vile women have been saved. Their delicious scent and their warm skin and their soft curves will soon sway their captors. Wickedness takes on many forms, folks. Many forms.”

The preacher summoned a young woman in the church audience then by pointing at her. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen or eighteen. “Come on, child, come on up here.” Encouraged by her parents and the enthusiastic crowd, the girl hesitantly climbed on stage. “Look at how beautiful she is,” the preacher said, walking around the slight figure with his arms outstretched, as if she were an animal on a pedestal in the circus and he was the ringmaster introducing her to them. He sniffed exaggeratedly at her and smiled. “She smells good. She sure looks good. She doesn’t seem evil. What man would not be tempted?” He turned back to the crowd. “Like many of us in our everyday lives, Moses must make a difficult decision. A terrible decision. One that many will find objectionable, but yet Moses – well, Moses knows it is necessary. A difficult choice, but a necessary one.”

A pregnant hush fell over the crowd. “What does he tell them?” the preacher asked his flock, staring as he did right into the eye of the camera, speaking to the thousands of lost sheep all

across the country who waited on his every word. “What? He tells them – and this is right out of the Holy Bible, folks – he tells them, ‘Slay, therefore, every male child and every woman who has had intercourse with a man. But you may spare and keep for yourselves all girls who had no intercourse with a man.’ What does that mean, folks? ‘Only the young girls who are virgins may live,’ Moses says. ‘Only the *virgins* can live amongst your people. Only the *virgins*, those who are pure in thought and deed, can be saved.’ Why? Because they are pure. They have not been corrupted.” He looked back at the young girl on stage and bellowed, “Tell us, young lady, are you a virgin? Are you pure in thought and deed? God is watching you! Remember that! We are watching you! Are you pure in both thought and deed?”

The girl nodded as tears ran down her cheeks. She smiled at the preacher and then out at her parents. “Yes,” she answered. “I am pure.”

The crowd went wild.

The man wiped his palm again on the easy chair. The preacher certainly was mesmerizing. He had the crowd eating out of his hand. Had the young virgin not been so pure, he would have had no problem rousing the masses to stone her, if that was what he so wished.

It was inspiring.

The man pressed rewind on his remote, and while the tape noisily chortled in the VCR, he unfolded the brown canvas bag on his lap. He ran his fingers over the soft brush tips inside, finally selecting a flat bristle and his dull painting knife. He picked up his artist’s palette from the side table and slowly mixed his palette of carefully selected paints. The heavy scent of the oils was intoxicating. The tape started again from the beginning. As the preacher took to his stage, the people hailed him as though he were a general coming back from war. As if he was the Messiah himself.

The man listened to the sermon one last time as he worked the final touches on his latest piece, finding the raw energy of the preacher's words to be as soothing and stimulating as a surgeon might find listening to classical music in the OR.

“Like many of us in our everyday lives, Moses must make a difficult decision. A terrible decision. One that many will find objectionable, but yet Moses – well, Moses knows it is necessary. A difficult choice, but a necessary one. What does he tell them? What?”

When he was done, the man turned from his work and put his brush into the turpentine mixture to soak. Next to the TV was his computer. He got up from the La-Z-Boy and moved to the swivel desk chair. His hands were shaking just a little as he rubbed a stubbly five o'clock shadow with fingers that were still wet with paint. On the screen before him, the pretty girl sat on her pink bed in her pink bedroom, surrounded by movie stars, pirates, and vampires, chatting on the phone while she tried to paint her toenails.

“He tells them, ‘Slay, therefore, every male child and every woman who has had intercourse with a man.’”

The man licked his lips and swallowed hard. For just a second he felt ashamed, wondering why it was he thought the things he thought. But it was too late to get a conscience. Neither his thoughts nor his deeds were pure. His soul was already damned.

“‘But you may spare and keep for yourselves all girls who had no intercourse with a man.’”

He typed something on the computer and hit ‘send,’ then watched as the pretty girl hopped off the bed and hurried with a smile across the room to her computer.

It was a simple question, but it had certainly gotten her attention, hadn't it?

It always did.

r u online?

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Lainey Emerson nibbled on the ragged nub of Crazy Glue and broken press-on nail that was still stuck to her thumb and stared hard at the computer. With her free hand on the mouse, she guided the arrow across the screen. Her palms were melting, and her heart was beating so hard and so fast it felt as if it was gonna push right out of her chest. The thousands of butterflies trapped in the pit of her stomach furiously fluttered their wings as the arrow approached the ‘send’ box. All she had to do was just hit the button. Hit the button and send the stupid two-sentence email that’d literally taken her – she looked at the clock in the bottom right corner of the screen and grimaced – *hours* to word just right. And still she hesitated, rolling the mouse back and forth in sweaty fingers.

You should never put anything in writing or in pictures that you wouldn’t want to see or read on the front cover of the New York Times, Elaine.

The ominous words sounded so loud and so clear in her head, Lainey could swear she smelled the stink of cigarettes on her mom’s breath as she preached them. She pushed back from her desk, shook the dire ‘Don’t learn things the hard way like me!’ Parental Advisory Warning out of her brain, and looked around her now almost-dark bedroom. Long shadows blacked out the faces on the dozen or so movie posters that covered her walls. Outside, all that remained of the late afternoon sun as it sunk into the Everglades were a couple of faint orange ribbons.

6:12? Was it really that late? She suddenly heard the quiet and realized the boisterous shouts from the roller-hockey game that’d been playing in the street all afternoon had stopped – the

players and cheerleaders all long gone home to dinner and homework. Two things Lainey still hadn't even started yet. And Bradley? She hadn't heard from her little brother in a while, either. A long while, now that she thought about it. She chewed the inside of her lip. Usually a good thing, but *so* not a good thing now that her mom was gonna be home soon ...

The front door opened and Lainey prayed it wasn't her mother. It closed with a slam. Thirty seconds later gunfire erupted in the living room as Brad resumed blowing away cops on *Grand Theft Auto*, the dumb video game that he had to play at full blast just to annoy her. Anger quickly displaced relief and she regretted wasting a good prayer on her brother's obnoxious wellbeing. At least he was home and she hadn't lost him. She raised the volume on her Good Charlotte CD to drown out the screams and machine-gun fire and turned her attention back to the computer. She so needed to stay in the moment or she'd never be able to do this.

The picture on the screen glowed in the dark room, waiting impatiently to be shot off into cyberspace. A pretty girl she barely recognized, with sleek dark hair and smoky eyes, smiled provocatively back at her. A pretty girl Lainey still sheepishly thought looked nothing like her. Tight jeans and a midriff-baring T-shirt showed off a slim but curvy shape. Full, glossy red lips matched equally glossy, long red fingernails, which were posed confidently on her hips, like an *America's Next Top Model* contestant – her friend Molly's idea. Normally Lainey didn't like how she looked in any picture, but, then again, normally she didn't look anything like she did in *this* picture. Normally her waist-length unruly chestnut hair was pulled back in a low ponytail or put up in a clip, her boring brown eyes hidden behind wire-rimmed glasses. Normally she didn't wear any make-up or jewelry or high heels or long red fingernails. Not because she didn't want to, but because she wasn't allowed.

But besides looking a little older than she was – and a little, well, *sexy* – Lainey rationalized that the picture wasn't *that* bad that she wouldn't want to see it in the newspaper. Some MySpace photos were a hell of a lot worse than this. It wasn't like she was naked or doing porn or anything. The most you could see besides her stomach and the fake belly-button ring was the pink outline of the padded bra she'd stolen from her older sister Liza, under the white T-shirt that she'd also stolen from Liza. Maybe the jeans were kinda low and the shirt kinda tight, but ...

Lainey shook the creeping, noisy doubts out of her head. She'd already taken the picture. She'd already broken the rule. And the truth was, she looked pretty hot, if she did say so herself. The real worry at this point was, what would Zach think when he saw it?

Zach. ElCapitan. Just the thought of him made Lainey's hands sweat. She looked at the picture taped to the side of the computer screen. Blond hair, bright blue eyes, the quirkiest, sweetest smile, and just the cutest shadow of face gruff. And muscles ... wow! She could see them even through his Hollister T-shirt. Nobody she knew in seventh grade had even the hope of either a muscle or a hair on their scrawny bodies. Since she'd met Zach a few weeks ago in a Yahoo chat room for the new *Zombieland* movie, Lainey had been forming a mental picture of what he might look like. This fabulous, funny guy who liked the same movies – even the really bad ones – listened to the same music, hated the same subjects, distrusted the same type of plastic people she did, had the same problems with his own parents. It would be too much to ask for him to be anything more than a geek with bad acne and even worse hair and an uncle who'd pulled strings to get him on the varsity football team. But then last Friday Zach had finally sent her a picture, and the very first thing she'd thought was, 'Oh my God, this guy could model for Abercrombie & Fitch!' He was *that* amazingly good looking. And what was even more amazing was that this totally cool, *freakin'* captain of the football team with model looks liked *her*. That's

when she knew reciprocating with a snapshot of her own boring self just wasn't gonna happen, especially since that self was still three years away from the sixteen she'd told him she was. A small fib that would definitely matter to a senior in high school being scouted by colleges. She knew he'd never be into that, and their friendship – or whatever it was that was happening between them – would be over before she could hit the reply button to his Dear Jane email. If he even bothered to send her one.

She nibbled off the last chunk of nail and spat it in the garbage. The entire fake set had taken her and her best friend, Molly, hours to put on last Saturday for the 'photo shoot', and only a few short seconds to rip off this morning in gym class. The nails were her favorite. Long and pointy and oh-so red. More than the shoes or make-up or wearing Liza's clothes, it was those nails that had made her feel so ... glamorous. So grown-up. She loved tinkering them on glasses and rolling them impatiently on tables. It'd taken her the whole weekend to figure out just how to pick up a piece of paper! And now, like Cinderella's ball gown and crystal coach, they were just a memory. At least Cindy got to keep a glass slipper as a memento of her time as a princess. All Lainey got was a chunk of chewed acrylic.

And, of course, a picture.

She stared at herself on the screen. That was it. If she thought about it any more she'd never do it. She closed her eyes, said a prayer and clicked the mouse. A little envelope zipped across the monitor.

Your message is on its way!

The cell phone in her back pocket buzzed and Gwen Stefani belted out 'The Sweet Escape'. Molly. She blew out a long held breath. 'Hey, M!'

'Did you send it?' an excited voice asked.

Lainey sighed and flopped back on her bed. ‘Finally, yeah.’

‘And?’

‘I haven’t heard back yet. I just sent it, like, two seconds ago.’

Molly Brosnan had been Lainey’s best friend since way back in kindergarten, and everyone – teachers, coaches, friends, parents – everyone always said, if the two of them looked even a little bit alike, they’d be identical twins. That’s how close they were. Or used to be, anyway. It was no coincidence Molly had called at almost the precise moment Lainey had clicked ‘send’. Things like that happened all the time – Molly thinking what she was thinking and vice versa. That’s what made this year suck so much. No matter what her mom said, different schools meant different lives. She picked the fuzz off her alien-green shag pillow. ‘I’m so nervous, M.’

‘What took you so long to send it?’

‘I’m a chicken.’

‘You have to call me the second you hear from him, Lainey.’

‘I will, I will. What do you think he’s gonna think?’

‘I already told you. You look hot. I mean it. He’s gonna love it.’

‘You don’t think I look fat?’

‘Please!’

‘Stupid?’

‘I wish I looked that dumb.’

Lainey sat up and stared at the computer across the room. ‘If I don’t hear back from him soon, M, I’m gonna freak! This waiting sucks.’

The bedroom doorknob suddenly began to violently jangle back and forth. ‘Lainey!’

‘Get lost, Brad! I mean it,’ Lainey yelled. ‘Get out of my room!’

‘You’re not allowed to close the door! Or lock it! Mom says!’

‘G’head and tell Mom, you tattle-tale! Lotta good it’s gonna do you, ’cause she’s NOT HERE! And I can’t wait till I tell her about you playing that video game you’re not supposed to play till after you’ve done your homework!’ she added as she fell back down hard on the bed.

‘Is that The Brat?’ Molly asked. ‘What’s he doing in your room?’

‘He’s not. He’s just outside the door. I can hear him breathing heavy through the crack. I wish I had some bug spray.’ Lainey squeezed her eyes shut. ‘I hate him sometimes, M. I swear it.’ Molly had a little brother, too, but hers was nice. Most of the time.

‘What’d he do now?’

‘He went through my books again. He drew mustaches on all of my *Betty and Veronica* comics and ruined them. Totally ruined them. He’s such an asshole.’

‘Did you tell your mom?’

‘Like that’ll do any good. Please. She probably gave him the comics and the marker ’cause the poor baby was bored.’ She sat up and reached for the bottle of nail polish on the cardboard box that was supposed to be a nightstand. She shook it and started to paint her toes.

‘You should tell her,’ Molly sniffed. ‘He shouldn’t be able to go into your stuff.’

‘She’s not home. She’s still at work.’

‘What about Todd?’

Todd was her stepdad and an entirely different story. If her mom babied Bradley, Todd definitely played favorites, which made sense, since Bradley was, after all, his kid and she wasn’t and that was life. ‘He’s not home yet, either, thank God. I’m babysitting.’ Lainey looked over at the door with a frown. ‘Not that he listens to me.’

‘Babysitting? Oooh. That means you’re in charge. My mom told Sean that corporal punishment is legal in Florida, which means she can use her hairbrush on his ass and you can beat Bradley’s with a belt.’ They both laughed.

‘If the prince gets a single bruise on his milky-white butt cheeks, I’ll be grounded till high school. Nice idea, but I’m just gonna IGNORE HIM while he breathes under my FREAKIN’ DOOR like a FREAKIN’ WEIRDO!!!’

The computer melodically blurped. An incoming IM.

Lainey looked over at the computer, her heart suddenly racing once again. She knew right away who it was.

ElCapitan says: r u online?

‘Oh my God, M!’ she whispered into the phone. ‘He just IM’d me. What do I do?’

Molly laughed. ‘Tell him hello!’

‘Yeah, but that means he must’ve got the email.’

‘No it doesn’t. Maybe he’s IMing you from his phone.’

You don’t know he’s seen the picture.’

Lainey stood up and paced the room. ‘He wants to know if I’m here.’

‘Just say hi, you dork. Do it. Do it now.’

‘OK, OK ...’ Hitting letters on the computer had never taken so much darn energy before. It felt like someone had poured lead into the tips of her shaking fingers.

LainBrain says: hi

Deep breath. Stay calm. ‘OK, M. I did it.’

The computer blurped again.

ElCapitan says: just got home. practice ended late. Coach still pissed over last weeks game.

‘What? What’d he say?’ Molly whined. ‘Tell me!’

‘Nothing. He said he just got home from football practice. Maybe you’re right. Maybe he didn’t get it?’ She paused for a second. ‘Or maybe he got it and he hates it! M!’

ElCapitan says: Got ur mess

Lainey held her breath.

‘What’d he say? Lainey!’

ElCapitan says: Nice pic 😊

Lainey let the air out all at once, as if someone had popped her screaming lungs with a pin. ‘He said nice pic, M! You think that’s good?’ Even asking the question, she couldn’t help but grin.

‘You’re a moron. I told you you looked hot. You better not let your mom see that picture. She’ll freakin’ flip. Speaking of flipping moms, mine’s downstairs having a breakdown. I gotta go eat. Say hi to Bradley Brat for me.’ She laughed. ‘*Not.*’

‘I’ll call you later.’ Lainey hung up the phone and stared at the words on the screen. She’d never felt this good before in her whole entire life. She wanted to scream. Then, another sentence appeared with a blurb.

ElCapitan says: even better than I pictured, and I have a great imagination ...

ElCapitan says: want 2 c even more of u

Lainey felt her cheeks light up as she looked around the bedroom. There was, of course, no one there but her, but she still felt strangely embarrassed. What should she say to that? What would Liza say? Did he mean that the way she thought he meant that?

The door to the garage opened with a loud creak. ‘Brad? Elaine? Hello? Where is everyone? Why is this video game on?’ The sound of her mom’s irritated voice echoed through the house, along with the click-clacking of her high heels on the ceramic tiles. She heard Bradley run down the hall and into his room. Coward. Lainey mouthed the next words out of her mother’s mouth.

‘Elaine!’

‘I’m in my room!’

‘Get off that computer. Did you even start dinner?’

And it was back from the ball once again. Back to reality.

LainBrain says: GTG. P911.

IM quick-speak for ‘Got to go – a parent is coming.’

EICapitan says: who?

LainBrain says: mom

EICapitan says: Damn! And we were just about 2 get on my favorite subject ...

The funny, uncomfortable feeling was back, and she pushed it aside. Why was she always such a baby? She had to get over that.

EICapitan says: thought she worked late mondays

EICapitan says: or is that fridays?

LainBrain says: fridays and every other monday. sorry about coach☹

‘Elaine! Did you hear me? Off that friggin’ computer *now!*’

LainBrain says: ☺LTL. she’s pissed.

LTL meant ‘let’s talk later’. Lainey opened up her Social Studies book to make it look like she’d been studying and crumpled a few pieces of notebook paper for effect, just in case her mom headed this way. Now it was time to boil hot dogs and listen to twenty minutes of shit as to why it was irresponsible of *her* to allow the aspiring psycho in residence to gun down cops and steal cars for two hours on the video game that *his own dad* had given him for Christmas. ‘Practice for the real world,’ Lainey wanted to say when the interrogation finally got started. ‘Let’s face it, Mom, Brad’s career options are gonna be limited.’ But that remark would probably get her smacked.

Just as she opened the door, the computer blurped again. She ran back over to the desk and stared at the words on the screen. She blushed, wrapping her arms absently around her chest.

EICapitan says: FYI. Pinks definitely your color ☺