

Rainbows do exist!

Pearl had been through every aisle of shelves at the bookstore, but she couldn't find the book she was looking for. She'd never been to this bookstore before, but her friend had insisted on going to this particular one. "Trust me, you'll like it," she had said. "It's a cute little place." More like cramped and confusing, Pearl thought. How does anyone ever find anything in this place?

She came to stand in front of a rack of paperback romance novels. They were in the first aisle closest to the door. Apparently, these were their bestsellers. Pathetic, Pearl thought, why would anyone waste her time reading this lovey-dovey crap? Not even love, more like a hyped-up play by play of some creative being's sexual fantasies. There were like ten different categories within this one section. Pearl skimmed the categories. Many of them ended with the term, "romance," which was just a polite euphemism for "erotica". There was American Romance, Romantic Suspense, Superromance, Historical Romance.... What the hell? Historical Romance?!, Pearl thought. Must be about how they used to do it in the good old Middle Ages. She continued scanning the other categories. There was Harlequin Intrigue, Harlequin Desire, Harlequin Suspense, Harlequin Presents, and oh my oh my, what do you know, Harlequin Presents EXTRA! Pearl couldn't help but give a mocking snicker at this one. Extra?! Really?, she thought. Those authors must have some imagination. After all, how much more extra can it get compared to the regular category?

She eventually decided to go ask the woman up front for help. The woman had long, curly brown hair that stretched halfway down her back. She had on one of those little, plastic nametags glued to her purple shirt near the top of her right breast. On top of it was written "Maxine" but who would notice it with that low cut, sleeveless tank top she was wearing that left little to the imagination. She was also wearing faded, blue jean booty shorts that rode low on her

hips. So much for professionalism, Pearl thought. There goes any hope those conservative people had for changing the world.

Pearl gave her the little post-it with the title and author of the book she wanted stretched across it in messy handwriting. "Oh, I've read this book. It's great. I go on an adventure every time I read it," Maxine said. Terrific, someone who's gotta voice her opinion. Gotta love the enthusiasm, other people say. Yeah, not so much, Pearl thought. Whatever happened to those shy, mousy girls that looked after bookstores before? They'd just leave you alone. Just nod and smile, Pearl thought. Nod and smile. Maybe then, she'll get the hint.

Maxine skidaddled off to some foreign aisle in the back of the bookstore. Five minutes slowly passed and in those five minutes, something screwy started happening with the lights. They started flickering and for a moment, complete darkness fell onto the store. Thirty long seconds ticked by and Pearl heard Maxine's voice call out to her, "Don't worry. This happens all the time. Just wait one second while I get the lights back on." No, I'm going to go jump off the top of the Sears Tower! Of course I'm going to wait here, Pearl thought with annoyance. I want my book!

There was a small flicker and some kind of electrical frying sound. Then, all the lights flooded the store once again. Maxine came back with a large, black leather-covered book and handed it to Pearl. There was a gold, zig-zagging design that bordered the entire cover. It looked more the size of an atlas than a book. Pearl paid for the book and shoved the little receipt into the large pocket in the back of her wallet. Then, she rushed through the door, her short amber-colored hair bouncing against the back of her neck. She walked about a block to the wide, open lot where she had parked in and went to go sit in her car.

After taking a deep breath, she picked up the book and analyzed the cover. Etched into it in bright, electric blue capital letters was the title, "Storm Riders." The two words were connected

in the middle by a fancy silver thunderbolt outlined in gold and black. It took up about half the page. She wondered how her friend, Misty had ended up reading this book. It didn't seem like something she would usually read. The term, storm didn't seem to be in her friend's vocabulary. She was all rainbows and lollipops. She always had to look at the *bright* side of everything. For once, Pearl would have loved to catch her in one of her not-so-fine moments.

Pearl began flipping through the book, but stopped at the 100th page. There was something scribbled on the top right corner of the page in bold-inked, green letters. It said, "Don't read this. I'm warning you, Pearl. It's for your own good." Pffshhh, yeah, right, Pearl thought. What a joke. How is my name in here anyway? "You're too critical for your own good. You won't survive in this world." Oh, so now I'm a whiny, pessimistic bitch, right? "Don't do it." Oops, too late. I read it anyway. Now what?

Suddenly, there was a blinding blue flash and Pearl had no choice but to close her eyes with an "Oh, shit!" expression on her face. She could feel heat radiating off her fingertips. The white part of her nails disintegrated into a soft, flour-like powder. There was smoke building up in the car and the windows were getting fogged up. The book was getting so hot that Pearl couldn't stand to hold it anymore. She flung it to where the passenger seat was. When she managed to open her eyes again, for some reason, she was sitting on top of a massive cloud. What the hell?

There was a huge castle covered in leafy vines to her left, and right in front of her, about fifteen feet away was what looked like would result in a huge explosion. Two large planes, one white and blue and the other, gray and red were heading right for each other. Pearl stood up and looked around some more, but everything was a blur. She was so confused. What happened, dammit? How did I get here? She looked down to the cloud she was standing on and two feet away from her was the book she had been holding just a few seconds ago. She tried to pick it up, but the book was still hot like the tip of an iron and she ended up being jolted back by the pain in

the middle of her palm. “Aww, shit!,” she said, grabbing her hand and pulling it close to her chest. There was a red burn mark, the shape of a delicate thunderbolt stretching across it.

Pearl started to walk away, further back from her position on the cloud before the two planes crashed into each other. She tried to make a run for it, but her feet were starting to sink into the cloud. She bent down to feel the texture of the cloud, but when she ran her hand over the surface, she felt nothing. She tried waving her hand through, but all she felt was thin air. How is this possible?, Pearl thought. Shouldn’t I have fallen through already?

She started to believe that someone was pranking her. “All right, all right, joke’s over,” she shouted to no one in particular. “You’ve had your fun. Now, get me out of here. Is this some sort of happy-go-lucky kiddie ride at the amusement park, because if you know me,” anger starting to build up in her voice, “then you know that I’M NOT AMUSED!!!” She kept cursing and shouting into thin air but got no response. She took another deep breath, all aggravated and continued to make her way to the cloud behind her. She reached the edge of her cloud and didn’t know whether to jump to the next cloud or not. What if it didn’t catch her this time? Should I risk it?, she wondered.

The castle she spotted at her first sight of this place seemed to be coming closer and closer to her. “Ahhh, what’s the worst that can happen in this lame place? Clouds and castles! I’m surprised I haven’t seen a bright, sunshiny rainbow yet,” Pearl commented. “I’ll fall onto the top of a chocolate sundae and I’ll make friends with a cutesy, little unicorn. Then, all will be well in my world.” Pearl said this last bit with contempt and bitterness towards the person that was responsible for putting her in this place, her worst nightmare.

Just as she was about to jump off the cloud, she realized that she wasn’t the only one in this place. She quickly waved her arms backwards to stop herself from falling. Her second glance around showed her that there were some people standing on the other clouds. One of them was

waving to her from far away. It was a girl about her age with long, black hair. Was that Misty? Pearl thought. What was she doing here? Pearl looked back to check how close the castle had come to her. Well, the castle was coming closer, but the two planes had seemed to vanish into thin air. That's strange, Pearl thought. Things don't just disappear like that. What the hell is going on? Ughhhh... why am I even here?

The cloud that had the supposed Misty standing on it came closer and closer and as it did, Pearl saw that she wasn't standing on a cloud. It only looked like a fluffy, marshmallow cloud, but in actuality, it had a white mane and tail and a long silver horn. She was riding on the majestic unicorn sidesaddle. The sun was setting behind them and lit up Misty and the white horse's frame, giving them an angelic glow. Misty looked like some knight that was coming to rescue her, her long, black hair encasing her in a soft, feminine armor. She was wearing a beautiful, sparkling, baby blue gown that made her look like an angel. "Why am I not surprised? It would be her," Pearl said to herself with a smug grin. At this point, Misty was only five feet away from her, where she stopped. Her floating black hair came down to rest against her back.

"I knew I'd find you here," Misty said. "Didn't it say not to read the message? But no, you had to be such a smartass and read it. Why can't you ever listen to my warnings?" Whoa! Misty had never talked to Pearl like that before. In fact, she never swore. "Wait, that warning was from you? That's why I'm in this stupid place?!", Pearl exclaimed, ready for a battle. "This place is NOT stupid!!!," Misty shouted with anger. Behind her, the clouds started coming together to form one gray mass and it covered up the sunlight. "This is my HOME! DO NOT insult it! In fact, you've tarnished it with your presence." Little sparks started to form within each cloud and the sparks reached the surface. Some of the clouds from the mass behind Misty exploded with a crackle, but Pearl's cloud, although sizzling with lighting electricity, stayed in one piece.

Pearl looked down at the cloud and then, at the sad anger in Misty's eyes. She was dubious that this was all real. She still thought she was being pranked. "This is your home? You live here?! Right, and I was born on Mars and am actually a mind-controlling robot from outer space." "I'm not lying. Why do you think I'm always so optimistic? That's part of who I am. I'm an angel that was sent to look after you by your mother. God noticed that you haven't been the same since she passed away." Frustrated tears were starting to well up in her eyes. "I've tried and tried to get you out of this dark phase, but you're so damn stubborn." Pearl, not wanting to confront any conversation made about her deceased mother tried to make a joke out of Misty's vocabulary at this point. "Smartass? Damn? Hey, if you're an angel, aren't you breaking some kind of golden law about not swearing?," Pearl commented, snickering a little.

Meanwhile, anxiety was building up inside her and she didn't know whether she could control her feelings anymore. She had promised herself a long time ago to never cry in front of others. Don't let them think you're weak, she'd tell herself. Instead, she'd cry when she was alone, her treasured car being one of the sacred spots.

Misty just kept silent. She simply stared into the immense sadness behind Pearl's facade and rude sarcastic behavior. "You can't avoid it forever. It's been six years. You have to move on." Pearl just stopped snickering and her eyes met Misty's. She knew Misty was a really great friend. She knew Misty cared about her. She still didn't believe she was an angel though. Then again, what rational person would? Silence passed between them for many minutes, but it felt like hours. For some reason, Misty's dark purple eyes had been calming. Purple? Wow, Pearl thought, I'd never noticed that before and I usually notice details like that. Maybe I am missing out on life. Pearl's feelings about her mother's death were bubbling close to the surface. She didn't know whether she could hold them in any longer. Her heart started to beat faster, her lungs felt heavier, and she felt that she wasn't getting enough air.

Suddenly, Pearl could see her mom sitting on top of the big, gray, cloudy mass behind Misty. She couldn't take it anymore. She burst into tears. Tough, sarcastic Pearl finally broke down and sunk onto the cloud she was on. Her whole body started shaking and she began to hyperventilate. A crying whimper escaped her. "I'm... sorry, Mom...(sniffles)... I... tried...to...save....you...but... I (sniffles)... failed."

Misty understood exactly what Pearl was talking about. Pearl's mother had a weak heart. Six years ago, her mother started having a heart attack and she couldn't breathe. She had been vacuuming the living room and Pearl was in the kitchen when she heard her mother collapse onto the floor. Her mother, one hand pressing against her heart, reached out to her with the other hand, struggling to tell her something between breaths. Pearl was only ten at the time and she rushed to the kitchen cabinet to get her mom's heart medicine, but by the time she got to her mom, it was too late. She found her mom absolutely still and sprawled out on the floor, her eyes wide open and staring up into her daughter's face.

Misty got off her majestic unicorn and walked on thin air over to Pearl. She embraced her in a warm sisterly hug, knowing that silence was the best option. Pearl looked up to where she last saw her mother through a flood of tears, but she wasn't there anymore. Instead, she was next to her, embracing her. Pearl looked into Misty's eyes, which had now changed color. They were a dark chocolate brown, the color her mother's eyes had been.

It was then she realized that Misty had been her mother all along in the form of a girl her age, watching over her all this time. Her mother had never left her, had she? Misty was a new student at her school the day after her mom's funeral. Pearl didn't think anything of it back then, but it all made sense now. Misty's sudden arrival, her insistence on hanging out with her no matter how much she had avoided her, her constant mentoring, her peppy smiley attitude. She had

always liked that part of Misty, the way she could lift her spirits even though she never let Misty think it. And now she knew why. She reminded her of her mother.

Misty spoke but out came her mother's voice. "It's okay, Pearl. Don't feel guilty. It wasn't your fault. It was out of your control. Please forgive yourself." She smiled at Pearl and Pearl, for the first time in six years gave back a genuine smile. The gray clouds began to transform into more unicorns, seven to be exact. They weren't white like Misty's unicorn though. They were beautiful, lighter shades of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Well, what do you know, Pearl thought, I got to see a rainbow after all, the best kind, a present from my mother. And with that, Misty disappeared along with the white horse as well.

"Wait, don't go! Not yet! Please, I have so much to ask you." The sun shattered around her and Pearl held up an arm to cover her eyes from the piercing brightness. "You already have your answers. They've been there all along," her mother's voice echoed from somewhere within the vacuum sucking away all that was precious to her. The clouds melted away and the darkness was closing in on her. Before she knew it, she was standing in complete darkness. She didn't know quite where yet.

From the distance, she heard a voice call out to her. "Don't worry. This happens all the time. Just wait one second while I get the lights back on," it said. There was a small flicker and an electrical frying sound. Then, a bunch of lights turned on and a girl came strutting up to her in booty shorts and a sleeveless tank. She handed her a book with a black leather cover. It was Maxine. Pearl was disappointed. Had it all been a five-minute hallucination? She gave a long sigh and paid for the book. Oh well, she thought, she always knew good things never last. She thanked Maxine for her help and added in, "I'm looking forward to reading it. I love a good adventure book!" Pearl beamed a smile at her and Maxine returned it with a smile of her own.

Pearl went out the door and walked about a block to her car. Once she got in, instead of flipping through the book, she opened its cover first. What she saw on the first page delighted her. There was a picture of her mom as Misty and her sitting in the middle of a cloud embracing. Pearl looked at this picture and smiled, thinking back to her special moment with her mother. She ran her hand over the picture and felt a weight being lifted off her. She took another deep breath, still thinking back when a dreary song echoed softly throughout her car. Oops, gotta change that ring tone. Much too dreary for my taste, she noticed. She picked up the phone and what she heard on the other end delighted her even more. “Wanna go get some ice cream or something?” Misty’s oh-so-familiar sweet voice burst through. “I would love to,” Pearl said. “See ya there in fifteen minutes.”