



K.L. Randis

"Beautifully  
written,  
hauntingly  
real, *Spilled  
Milk* is a  
must read for  
any young  
adult today."  
-F.P. Lione,  
Author

# Spilled Milk

*Based on a true story*

## **Spilled Milk**

K.L Randis

*To Grandma Eileen and Grandpa George,  
For believing in me*

*And to my husband,  
You complete me*

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## Prologue

They never gave me a polygraph. I imagined myself strapped to a machine with a series of questions being rattled off. The proctors would nod their heads and mark the sheets as it fed out the results. Everyone wanted to know the truth, yet they asked the wrong questions over and over. Are you okay? Do you need a break? What can I do? No one would want to hear the real answers.

My hand closed around the organic chemistry note cards in my pocket. *How does Hydrogen and Chlorine react in the presence of an Alkaline?*

The corner of my mouth twisted upward. *Inappropriate to laugh, stop it.* I forced a serious face before anyone noticed. There I was, sitting in the District Attorney's office with stupid organic chemistry note cards in my pocket.

My mom sat on the adjacent wall from me, staring off into space somewhere. I also had the ability to fix my eyes on a given object while my brain sputtered into shut down mode. It was a welcomed retreat at times.

Deep crevices muddled the brilliance of my mom's eyes and I wondered what she was thinking. Her weight shifted from one side of the chair then back again. It was a common dance she did to relieve the pressure in her lower back. The only interruption to her gaze happened when a man or woman in a suit entered the room.

I wondered if she even knew what organic chemistry was. “You would need this oxidizer. These two elements react like this, see?” I would draw a little diagram. “Simple.”

“Oh, I don’t know Brooke, you’ll never need that anyway.” The look on her face, the way her lips spread into a smaller, thin line told me she didn’t want to hear about the things she refused to understand.

I was nineteen-years-old, a sophomore in college. The room could barely hold ten people, and it was cement gray, just like I imagined when I thought of a courthouse waiting room. A secretary sat in the corner checking her email, only stopping to pick up the phone or take a long, hard swallow of her mega sized WaWa coffee. She was the only one in the room that looked at ease while everyone else sat in an awkward silence waiting for Heather to come in and tell us what was next.

*I hate this room. My butt is asleep. Yes, Miss Secretary, can I help you?  
I’ll just stare back.*

Mismatched posters held to the wall with ripened shards of tape. My uncle’s chair had one leg slightly shorter than the rest and his mindless rocking helped pass the time.

My aunt picked up a pamphlet sitting next to her and opened it. It returned to the table just as fast. STD’s and their warning signs was not her choice of reading material this morning.



Heather shuffled through the door with wide eyes, banging her briefcase against her knees. “Okay, good, everyone’s here then.”

She was my designated victims advocate. Her job was to guide me through the court hearings so I could understand, so she usually had to explain things more than once. The flood of information I was expected to absorb about the judicial system failed to hold any meaning to me.

Heather didn’t try to sugarcoat anything. She was blunt. “This is what the judge means,” followed by, “Any questions?”

Hundreds. Thousands even. I solved chemical reactions with ease, but tripped over the things Heather tried to drill into my head. She was worn too.

“I don’t know how you’re doing this,” Heather said just a week ago, her emerald eyes drooping. “I give you a lot of credit kiddo. They really tore you down in there, and you kept your own. I know I keep saying this, but it’ll be over soon.”

I *would* get an Irish victims advocate. Her hair bounced around her face blazing in its red glory and highlighted the doubt in her eyes as she tried to soothe me. I took it with a grain of salt, smiled, and accepted the one of many hugs that generally came my way after a debriefing.

She would make some kind of remark about how us both being Irish was the only reason we would ever consider fighting this long and hard, but

that we made a great team, didn't we?

"You better come see me when all this is over," she said, more than once. "You know, if you can ever handle coming back *here*," she motioned, flicking her hand to the space surrounding us. She was right. I hated this room, this entire place. The smell of burnt coffee, the weird sounds the elevator made as we hurried down to courtroom three. I wanted to forget it all.

I lost track of how many of the courtrooms I had seen the inside of sometime after the first year of going there. Heather kept me grounded.

The security guards knew me well and were always happy to see me. The woman guard would greet me with a smile. "Ah, back again today?"

I would force a half smile while scanning the lobby area. She would read my face. "He's not here yet, honey."

I relaxed and focused on getting into the District Attorney's office. The faster the better.

We parked behind the building and came through the less utilized handicapped entrance. Mom had rods and screws molded to her spine from her work injury years ago. She was a walking tin man, awkward gait included, guaranteed to set off the annoying alarm on the metal detectors. They waved a wand over her instead. She would nod and apologize for the

inconvenience to the guards, but the smirk on her face absorbed all the pitied glances thrown her way.

Stroudsburg was a pretty small town in nowhere Pennsylvania, so coming through the back also threw off any news reporters trying to overhear conversations between everyone that walked into the building behind me.

“Well then,” the guard would say, lowering her voice. “Let’s hope I don’t have to see you anymore after today.” She would wink as I crossed the lobby to Heather’s office.

“Doesn’t my lawyer look like David Caruso, you know, the guy on CSI Miami? He’s got reddish hair,” I said to Heather, moving my hand over my own unruly mob of wavy hair. She checked him out and raised an approving eyebrow.

Even though he was my lawyer I exchanged words with him maybe three times throughout the whole time I knew him. Generally anything that I needed to know Heather told me. She would relay any information back to him that I needed to tell him. His eyes would say *I’m sorry you’re here again* whenever I would enter his office.

I sometimes imagined him making those slam dunk speeches I saw on CSI. Secretly I wanted to witness the kind of closing statement that would leave an audience gasping *I knew it! Case Solved!* He remained quiet and

collected, though, boring even. I grimaced. I never wanted my life to end up like a TV show anyway. This was real life, *my life*.

A lot of family showed up on the last day of court. I understood the drive from Long Island, New York to Pennsylvania was a long one, so I didn't expect the support *every* time we had a hearing. That last day was important.

There was comfort in the waiting room, a sense of familiarity. Family stared at me and waited for me to cry, to think, to breathe.

Secretaries and lawyers rushing in late to meet their first clients of the day analyzed all the people around me as they passed through. They acknowledged all the adults, the only child in the room. I ignored them and studied my note cards. They tightened their lips, some shook their heads.

*Must be a custody hearing, poor kid.*



## Chapter One

*Wow, he can hold his breath for a long time.*

My brother's head bobbed halfway under the water of the kiddie pool. I traced the outline of Barbie's face on my bathing suit and waited for him to come up. Adam could hold his breath longer this time since he was seven, a whole year older than me, so his mouth must be bigger to hold more air.

*Oh well, I won the first two times we played who-can-hold-their-breath-the-longest, I guess he can win this one.*

I poked him in the back again to signal that I had come up for air and his head sank toward the bottom and rose again like a lazy balloon. He didn't budge.

"Come on, Adam, you win. You can come up now."

The way his body drifted made the hairs on my neck feel funny. I stiffened a little. Where's Dad? Does he see this?

*There he is, talking to the neighbor, probably boring things. It's funny our neighbors name is Cornelia, good thing she's old, sounds like an old name. I wouldn't even play with someone with a name like that, with a name that sounds like a vegetable or a disease. They're nice neighbors, I guess, but their dogs are mean. Maybe cause we tease them through the fence. I should tell Dad. If he yells at Adam to get up he definitely will. How is he holding his breath that long?*

I climbed over the side of the pool and avoided dog poop as I crossed the lawn.

“Dad?”

I knew I shouldn't interrupt his adult conversation. This was important though; Adam couldn't stay underwater all day since we still had a fort to build. I wasn't stupid, it was his turn to sneak food from the pantry and he just didn't want to. I was sure that that's what this was all about, sneaky older brother.

My dad kept talking to Cornelia about how Long Island isn't what it used to be, and how much he hates bills. “New York is an expensive place to live, I know, but how am I supposed to raise these kids and send all three of them to private school on one paycheck? Not to mention Molly didn't plan on breaking her back, and disability only pays so much. Plus she's due any day now, that's just another mouth to feed.”

“Dad, I have to tell you something.”

Cornelia looked down at me and smiled. *She's a pretty lady to have a disease for a name.*

Dad gave me the stare, the one that said go away. I don't think I've ever really seen his eyes because his glasses are so thick, but I know they're blue, like mine. My mom's are blue, and all of us kid's eyes are blue, so his have to be too. His are different though, his eyes never laugh.

“Yea, what?”

*Better make this fast.* “I have to tell you something.”

He blinked at me.

“Adam won’t get up. And he already won the contest so-”, I pointed toward the pool.

My dad was halfway across the yard before I even put my hand down. When I started running after him, he had Adam scooped up in his arms and face up on the ground beside the pool, his beard pressed against his lips. They were the color of blueberries. Cornelia started screaming about an ambulance, but I didn’t see one. All I saw was Adam lying on the ground in his Ninja Turtles bathing suit.

*What a faker, he doesn’t have to fake to get attention, I already know he won.*

Adam started coughing and water came out of his mouth at the same time he started crying. “Daddy!” he gasped still choking, his white knuckles grabbing at Dad’s shirt. I started crying too because it seemed like the right thing to do, and I didn’t realize that Adam was really in trouble until just then.

My dad helped Adam to his feet. “That’s all I need, another bill for an ambulance. It’s not like I have insurance or anything. Brooke, get next door and tell Cornelia she better not call an ambulance. He’s fine.”



Cornelia didn't look happy but I did as I was told and ran back home. Adam was still breathing in deep swallows of air as tears slid down his cheek and a Popsicle stood hostage in his left hand. My dad sat at the kitchen table, his hands shaking as he sipped his water.

*Look at him, my dad, he just saved Adam's life. I bet he would save mine too if I needed it. I bet he would do anything for us.*

My feet stuck to the kitchen floor as I crossed the room and grabbed my dad's arms to open them so I could crawl into his lap. I wrapped my arms around his neck and put my cheek against his scruffy face. He always smelled like machines. Mom said it's because he works hard all day, putting them together, making sure they work right.

"Let's not tell mom about this, snuggle bug." He pulled me into his chest with one arm and took another sip of his water.

Adam's near drowning would be the first of many secrets I would keep for my dad. "I won't, Daddy."

I put my head on his chest. I knew why he didn't want me to tell. Mom would get upset she missed Dad saving Adam's life. She would have wanted to see it happen too, like I did, so she could remember all her life how great he is, like I will.



## Chapter Two

I was seven. All I knew about a C.B radio was that my mom and dad met on one and after a week of talking they decided to meet up at Jones Beach. It took them over an hour to find each other since New York's beaches that stretched the length of Long Island were packed before noon on the blazing summer weekends.

My aunt had already landed her beau-to-be and had a wedding planned for that October. Not wanting to be outdone, my mom moved in with David after a few short weeks. They wed in September and planned the house, the two kids, and the white picket fence. Three kids, two bug infested apartments and a small unkempt ranch on a desolate dead end street later, I finished a glass of milk and readied my next question.

“So, what's a C.B?” I asked.

After I watched a cartoon that morning about two giraffes in love, I realized I didn't even know how my parents met. The giraffe's flirted through a lyrical orchestra of words and sing-along's. I imagined that's what my mom felt like.

Mom looked up from the tea bag she was trying not to burn her fingers with. “Uh, it's a way people used to meet each other. You would talk over the radio. Get to know people you wouldn't normally meet. It was a new kind of technology then. Everyone was doing it, I wasn't the only one.”

I remained motionless. *Keep going.*

She took a sip of her tea. I stared at her.

“Why, you doing a book report or something?”

“No.”

I watched the cigarette ash dangling from her mouth threaten to drop onto the table before turning away. It was always the same. Unless there was a reason, keep your questions to a minimum. She went back to her tea, ending the conversation. I left to find Adam.

He was cross legged on the floor playing with his K’Nex set when I walked into the living room. I leaned against the grand piano and cleared my throat. “You’ll never guess how mom and dad met.” My arms folded across my chest and I shifted my weight. “Mom just told me.”

“Through a C.B,” he said, without looking up.

“Not-uh.” *Why does he always know everything?*

He stared at me.

“How’d *you* know?” I said.

We were fifteen months apart in age which meant everything was a competition; who could read all the Disney books the fastest, ride their bike further or know all answers to the universe both large and small. I studied Adam as he focused on jamming a long yellow connector onto a blue corner piece.

*Ha, that's not gonna fit, he needs the green connector. Stupid.*

He would sit there for hours in his solitude and craft the most magnificent things; Ferris wheels, cars, the empire state building. Sometimes I would play with him, but building houses and cars that fell apart got boring.

“I found an old box in the garage a few months ago. It looked like a radio so I took it apart because it looked broken,” he said. He shifted onto his knees to search for another piece.

“So how'd you know that's how mom and dad met then?” My eyes glanced over the holes in his sneakers. His t-shirt swam around his stick arms.

Adam had a way of making you feel like you should know the answer to things and that it was some great inconvenience for him to have to explain anything. I shifted from one foot to another, raised my eyebrows and sighed loud enough to wake a sleeping baby. He fished around for a random piece, skipping over the green one.

I learned that as long as I was quiet and let him think I was seriously concerned about not having a clue what he's talking about, he'll save me and let me in on the thoughts running through his head.

After a minute Adam pushed one of his sleeves above his shoulder blade. There was a white scar the size of a grain of rice on the back of his

shoulder. He rubbed it thoughtfully before his eyes met mine. “I showed Dad how cool the inside of the box was. There were all these wires and stuff. He told me I broke the C.B him and mom met on. She was keeping it I guess. He pushed me into the wall. Mom’s garden scissors cut me.”

“Oh.”

Mom tripped over a toy fire truck as she entered the room. “Hey-*Adam*,” she said, looking at all the scattered pieces on the floor. You could barely see the spinach colored carpet beneath the toys and random pieces of clothing scattered everywhere, which was no great feat in this cramped room. “I thought I told you to put this away? Now let’s go, put this away, *now*.” She picked up a toy, decided she didn’t know what to do with it, and put it back down again. “We’re not going anywhere unless this room is spotless. You have five minutes.”

Adam practiced his lawyer skills. “Mom, I *only* have to finish this one piece.”

“Where we goin’ Mom?” I asked.

“Grandma’s, Grandpa’s making dinner. Once Thomas wakes up from his nap and after Kat nurses. Adam I said *now*.” She shoved a pile of plastic pieces into a pile with her foot.

“But Mooooom,” Adam said. “It’s not fair. All I need to do is this *one piece*.”

I wanted to go to Grandma's. *Now*. My knees hit the floor beside Adam and I searched for the part he needed. His eyes widened. "Hey, hey mom she's messing up my stuff!"

"I'm helping."

"No you're *not*. You don't even know what I'm looking for!"

*Mom is going to yell in two seconds. Where IS it?*

I locked eyes with the green connector and reached for it. The structure now complete, I looked toward Adam. His head dropped and he turned on his heel. "I knew I needed that piece. I didn't need your help to find it."

"Can we go now?" I asked.

Mom hustled Adam, Thomas, Kat and I into the minivan. We spent ten minutes driving down Southern State highway before we pulled up in front of my grandparents impressive, white Victorian home. Engraved columns hovered around the garden on the side of the house, and the lawn was striped from a fresh cut. Grandpa was expecting us. He was nowhere to be seen, but if I had to guess he was probably out in the backyard skimming the swimming pool. Oak trees that lined the property kept him busy during the fall and summer months between his weekly pool and grass preservations.

My seat belt was unbuckled and I jumped over the seat in front of me before Mom put the van in park. The metal door handle fumbled in my