STAINED by Cheryl Rainfield, mini book 1:6 scale.

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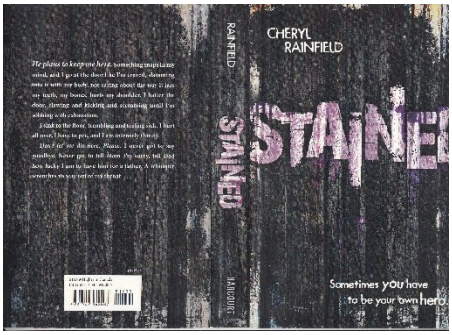
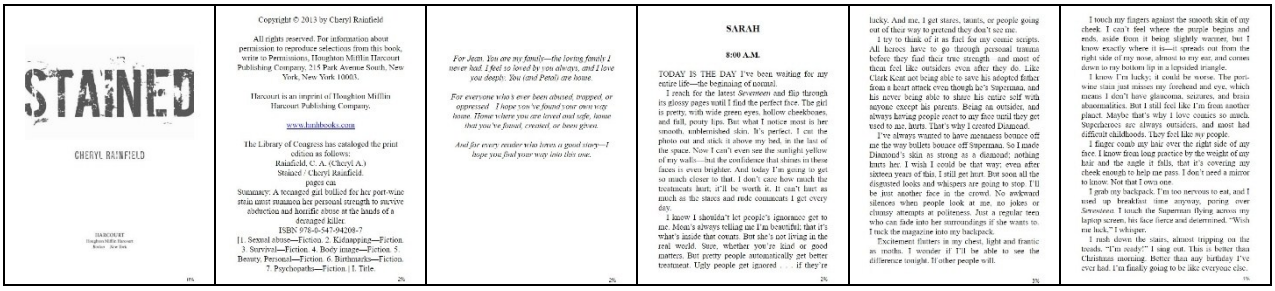
Print. Cut cover and paste onto thin cardstock. Cut pages in one long horizontal strip, pages still connected. Accordion fold along lines of pages. Glue white backs of pages together. Glue along spine, insert into cover. Clamp with binder clamp until dry.





STAINED

CHERYL RAINFIELD

HARCOURT

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[1. Sexual abuse—Fiction. 2. Kidnapping—Fiction. 3. Survival—Fiction. 4. Body image—Fiction. 5. Beauty, Personal—Fiction. 6. Birthmarks—Fiction. 7. Psychopaths—Fiction.] I. Title.

For Jean. You are my family—the loving family I never had. I feel so loved by you always, and I love you deeply. You (and Petal) are home.

For everyone who's ever been abused, trapped, or oppressed. I hope you've found your own way home. Home where you are loved and safe, knowing that you've found, created, or been given.

And for every reader who loves a good story—I hope you find your way into this one.

SARAH

8:00 A.M.

TODAY IS THE DAY I've been waiting for my entire life—the beginning of normal.

I reach for the latest *Seventeen* and flip through its glossy pages until I find the perfect face. The girl is pretty, with wide green eyes, hollow cheekbones, and full, pouty lips. But what I notice most is her smooth, unblemished skin. It's perfect. I cut the photo out and stick it above my bed, in the last of the space. Now I can't even see the sunlight yellow of my walls—but the confidence that shines in these faces is even brighter. And today I'm going to get so much closer to that. I don't care how much the treatments hurt, it'll be worth it. It can't hurt as much as the stares and rude comments I get every day.

I know I shouldn't let people's ignorance get to me. Mom's always telling me I'm beautiful; that it's what's inside that counts. But she's not living in the real world. Sure, whether you're kind or good matters. But pretty people automatically get better treatment. Ugly people get ignored . . . if they're lucky. And me, I get stares, taunts, or people going out of their way to pretend they don't see me.

I try to think of it as fuel for my comic scripts. All heroes have to go through personal trauma before they find their true strength—and most of them feel like outsiders even after they do. Like Clark Kent not being able to save his adopted father from a heart attack even though he's Superman, and his never being able to share his entire self with anyone except his parents. Being an outsider, and always having people react to my face until they get used to me, hurts. That's why I created Diamond.

I've always wanted to have mannequin bounce off me the way bullets bounce off Superman. So I made Diamond's skin as strong as a diamond; nothing hurts her. I wish I could be that way; even after sixteen years of this, I still get hurt. But soon all the disgusted looks and whispers are going to stop. I'll be just another face in the crowd. No awkward silences when people look at me, no jokes or clumsy attempts at politeness. Just a regular teen who can fade into her surroundings if she wants to.

I tuck the magazine into my backpack.

Excitement flutters in my chest, light and frantic as moths. I wonder if I'll be able to see the difference tonight. If other people will.

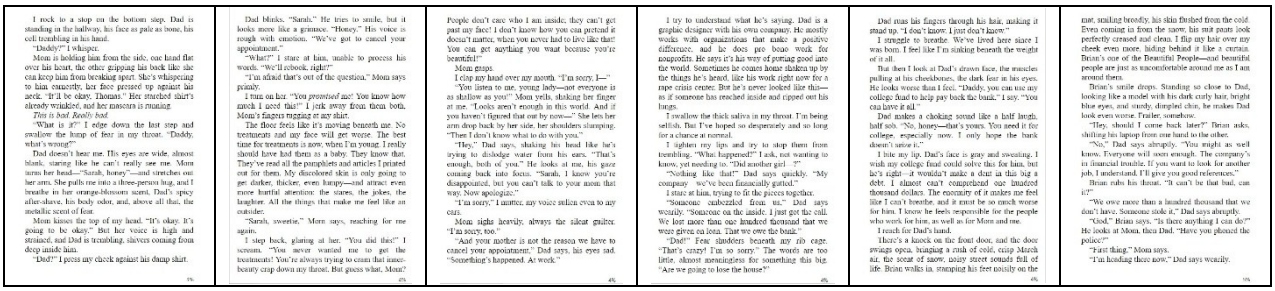
I touch my fingers against the smooth skin of my cheek. I can't feel where the purple begins and ends, aside from it being slightly warmer, but I know exactly where it is—it spreads out from the right side of my nose, almost to my ear, and comes down to my bottom lip in a lopsided triangle.

I know I'm lucky; it could be worse. The port-wine stain just misses my forehead and eye, which means I don't have glaucoma, seizures, and brain abnormalities. But I still feel like I'm from another planet. Maybe that's why I love comics so much. Superheroes are always outsiders, and most had different childhoods. They feel like my people.

I finger comb my hair over the right side of my face. I know from long practice by the weight of my hair and the angle it falls, that it's covering my cheek enough to help me pass. I don't need a mirror to know. Not that I own one.

I grab my backpack. I'm too nervous to eat, and I used up breakfast time anyway, poring over *Seventeen*. I touch the Superman flying across my laptop screen, his face fierce and determined. "Wish me luck," I whisper.

I rush down the stairs, almost tripping on the treads. "I'm ready!" I sing out. This is better than Christmas morning. Better than any birthday I've ever had. I'm finally going to be like everyone else.



I rock to a stop on the bottom step. Dad is standing in the hallway, his face as pale as bone, his cell trembling in his hand.

"Daddy?" I whisper.

Mom is holding him from the side, one hand flat over his heart, the other gripping his back like she can keep him from breaking apart. She's whispering to him emotionally, her face pressed up against his neck. "It'll be okay, Thomas." Her starched shirt's already wrinkled, and her mascara is running.

This is bad. Really bad.

"What is it?" I edge down the last step and swallow the lump of fear in my throat. "Daddy, what's wrong?"

Dad doesn't hear me. His eyes are wide, almost blank, staring like he can't really see me. Mom turns her head—"Sarah, honey"—and stretches out her arm. She pulls me into a three-person hug, and I breathe in her orange-blossom scent, Dad's spicy after-shave, his body odor, and, above all that, the metallic scent of fear.

Mom kisses the top of my head. "It's okay. It's going to be okay." But her voice is high and strained, and Dad is trembling, shivers coming from deep inside him.

"Dad?" I press my cheek against his damp shirt.

Dad blinks. "Sarah." He tries to smile, but it looks more like a grimace. "Honey." His voice is rough with emotion. "We've got to cancel your appointment."

"What?" I stare at him, unable to process his words. "We'll reschedule, right?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," Mom says primly.

I turn on her. "You *promised* me! You know how much I need this!" I jerk away from them both. Mom's fingers tugging at my shirt.

The floor feels like it's moving beneath me. No treatments and my face will get worse. The best time for treatments is now, when I'm young. I really should have had them as a baby. They know that. They've read all the pamphlets and articles I printed out for them. My discolored skin is only going to get darker, thicker, even lumpy—and attract even more painful attention: the stares, the jokes, the laughter. All the things that make me feel like an outsider.

"Sarah, sweetie," Mom says, reaching for me again.

I step back, glaring at her. "You did this!" I scream. "You never wanted me to get the treatments! You're always trying to cram that inner-beauty crap down my throat. But guess what, Mom? People don't care who I am inside; they can't get past my face! I don't know how you can pretend it doesn't matter, when you never had to live like that! You can get anything you want because you're beautiful!"

Mom gasps.

I clap my hand over my mouth. "I'm sorry. I—"

"You listen to me, young lady—not everyone is as shallow as you!" Mom yells, shaking her finger at me. "Looks aren't enough in this world. And if you haven't figured that out by now—" She lets her arm drop back by her side, her shoulders slumping. "Then I don't know what to do with you."

"Hey," Dad says, shaking his head like he's trying to dislodge water from his ears. "That's enough, both of you." He looks at me, his gaze coming back into focus. "Sarah, I know you're disappointed, but you can't talk to your mom that way. Now apologize."

"I'm sorry," I mutter, my voice sullen even to my ears.

Mom sighs heavily, always the silent grifter. "I'm sorry, too."

"And your mother is not the reason we have to cancel your appointment," Dad says, his eyes sad. "Something's happened. At work."

I try to understand what he's saying. Dad is a graphic designer with his own company. He mostly works with organizations that make a positive difference, and he does pro bono work for nonprofits. He says it's his way of putting good into the world. Sometimes he comes home shaken up by the things he's heard, like his work right now for a rape crisis center. But he's never looked like this—as if someone has reached inside and ripped out his lungs.

I swallow the thick saliva in my throat. I'm being selfish. But I've hoped so desperately and so long for a chance at normal.

I tighten my lips and try to stop them from trembling. "What happened?" I ask, not wanting to know, yet needing to. "Did another girl . . ?"

"Nothing like that!" Dad says quickly. "My company—we've been financially gutted."

I stare at him, trying to fit the pieces together.

"Someone embezzled from us," Dad says wearily. "Someone on the inside. I just got the call. We lost more than one hundred thousand that we were given on loan. That we owe the bank."

"Dad!" Fear shudders beneath my rib cage. "That's crazy! I'm so sorry." The words are too little, almost meaningless for something this big. "Are we going to lose the house?"

Dad runs his fingers through his hair, making it stand up. "I don't know. I just don't know."

I struggle to breathe. We've lived here since I was born. I feel like I'm sinking beneath the weight of it all.

But then I look at Dad's drawn face, the muscles pulling at his cheekbones, the dark lost in his eyes. He looks worse than I feel. "Daddy, you can use my college fund to help pay back the bank," I say. "You can have it all."

Dad makes a choking sound like a half laugh, half sob. "No, honey—that's yours. You need it for college, especially now. I only hope the bank doesn't seize it."

I bite my lip. Dad's face is gray and sweating. I wish my college fund could solve this for him, but he's right—it wouldn't make a dent in this big a debt. I almost can't comprehend one hundred thousand dollars. The enormity of it makes me feel like I can't breathe, and it must be so much worse for him. I know he feels responsible for the people who work for him, as well as for Mom and me.

I reach for Dad's hand.

There's a knock on the front door, and the door swings open, bringing a rush of cold, crisp March air, the scent of snow, noisy street sounds full of life. Brian walks in, stamping his feet noisily on the mat, smiling broadly, his skin flushed from the cold. Even coming in from the snow, his suit pants look perfectly creased and clean. I flip my hair over my cheek even more, hiding behind it like a curtain. Brian's one of the Beautiful People—and beautiful people are just as uncomfortable around me as I am around them.

Brian's smile drops. Standing so close to Dad, looking like a model with his dark curly hair, bright blue eyes, and sturdy, dimpled chin, he makes Dad look even worse. Paler, somehow.

"Hey, should I come back later?" Brian asks, shifting his laptop from one hand to the other.

"No," Dad says abruptly. "You might as well know. Everyone will soon enough. The company's in financial trouble. If you want to look for another job, I understand. I'll give you good references."

Brian rubs his throat. "It can't be that bad, can it?"

"We owe more than a hundred thousand that we don't have. Someone stole it," Dad says abruptly.

"God," Brian says. "Is there anything I can do?" He looks at Mom, then Dad. "Have you phoned the police?"

"First thing," Mom says.

"I'm heading there now," Dad says wearily.