

## **“Smiles of Hope”**

And there he stood, in the doorway, egging me on for a night out on the town. Happily, I agreed and quickly gathered my belongings, shoving them into my purse and hurrying into the bathroom to comb my hair and put on some make-up. He was busy talking to my mother while I prepped for the night, and my father had just pulled in the driveway from a long Monday at work.

Everyone liked my boyfriend Howard. He was the typical nice guy - handsome, and quiet. He had a strong presentation about him and it was rare that he ended a conversation without a laugh. However, behind all the laughs there was a quiet side to Howard. He enjoyed reading, models, and swimming. He was the captain for the school's swim team and I would frequently go to watch him at his swim meets.

For some reason he always looked tired, but regardless, there was never a dull moment when we were together. Howard was always over my house; he really liked my parents. Oddly enough, I have scarcely ever been at his house over the seven months we have been seeing each other, and most of the time, his parents weren't home, just his younger brother, Nicolas.

Today was my birthday and all I asked for was a nice dinner. There really wasn't anything I wanted. Coincidentally, I shared the same birthday as Howard's younger brother, so this was the second birthday meal he was having today. My parents told me that they would gladly cook me up whatever I wanted, but hesitantly, I refused and decided to go downtown with Howard instead. My parents didn't mind though, they knew Howard would take care of me.

We decided on a nice sushi restaurant near a bowling alley where we hung out with our friends on the weekends. We walked into town since it wasn't that far from my house. Even though I had a car, I rarely used it since my job was in town and Howard's house was in walking distance of my house as well.

Since it was a Wednesday night, there wasn't too much action happening at the bowling alley, but the parking lot, which was used for both the restaurant and

the bowling complex was full because of the popularity of the sushi. We expected this though; the restaurant's sushi was the huge rave in our town and there were many regulars to the restaurant each night. I had gone there numerous times before and I still can't get enough. The only downfall is that their food is relatively expensive.

After twenty-five minutes of sitting in the waiting area a thin, young, red-haired boy sat us at a table near the window, which was nice because being sat in the middle of the room is never fun.

Howard must have told him that it was my birthday when I went to use the restrooms because he and a couple other waitresses eventually brought me a piece of fudge cake with a single lit candle stuck in the middle of it. They unenthusiastically sung me happy birthday – it's the thought that counts.

Howard told me that I could order anything on the menu; however, I'm not that type of girl. I ordered a favorite dish of mine, which wasn't unreasonably priced. Howard ordered the same dish and said we could share his meal if I was still hungry after finishing mine. Like usual, it was delicious and we both finished our meals. Well, I finished my meal and then willingly helped Howard finish his.

On the way home we stopped in at the local bakery shop where my friend worked and Howard bought me my favorite cookies, peanut butter and M & Ms. I talked to my girl friend for a few minutes until her boss came in the back door and she had to pretend like she was diligently working.

However, while I was talking with her, I saw Howard on his cell phone. I watched as his expression turned grim. He approached the cashier and promptly paid one of the other young women working behind the counters.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing Janelle, you got the cookies you like?" he replied.

I knew he was lying when he tried to change the subject back to my cookies. Ignoring what he asked, I asked a second time, much more firmly.

"Howard, what's wrong!" I reiterated looking in his eyes for an answer.

He knew I wasn't kidding around.

“Janelle, I have to run home. I’m really sorry. Would you mind walking home without me?” he asked hesitantly.

“Sure that’s fine. Is everything alright?” I answered.

“Everything will be just fine.” He replied.

“Happy birthday Janelle, I love you so much.” he said with a reassuring smile. He gave me a kiss on the forehead and quickly walked out the door. I bought a bottle of water before heading out of the bakery.

Outside there were a couple young children running around with cookies in their hands. I looked around for Howard, but he was already out of sight. I walked out of the plaza the bakery was in and started down the main road. It was only 6:00PM and the summer sun was still setting. I walked past the general store and onto a connecting road, which was a shortcut to my house.

As I came onto the road, something startled me. It was Howard, running the other way through people’s yards while jumping fences at a frightening pace. He didn’t see me for he was much too concentrated on sprinting to look over his shoulder.

Curiosity filled my mind. What had caused our date to end so abruptly? Was it something I said? In the back of my mind I knew it would be wrong to snoop, but I decided to follow him anyway.

I found it quite difficult to keep up with him while remaining a far enough distance so that he wouldn’t notice me. He would hop fences; I would take the long way around. Howard was in far better shape than I was. Finally he arrived at his street. I crouched behind a bush next to a tattered old stop sign as Howard carefully approached his house. Once he entered, I pushed up further into his neighbor’s yard behind their tall oak tree. After a moment, I knew I needed to get closer to see anything clearly, so I silently approached the house and anxiously peered through his dining room window.

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Howard entered the foyer of the house and haste-fully moved through the dinning room towards the staircase leading to the second floor. Suddenly, a hand firmly grabbed his forearm and pulled him back abruptly. It was his father.

“Where the hell have you been?” Howard’s father yelled.

Howard could smell the stagnant aroma of alcohol on his father’s breath and could only fear for the worse.

“Sorry Dad, I was out with Janel...” he was cut off.

“The hell you were.” he exclaimed.

“Dad, you’ve been drinking. You should...” Howard responded.

“I should what? No son of mine is going to tell me what to do.”

Howard tried to pull away, but failed. His father held up his other hand, which had his belt in it and snapped it against Howard’s neck causing his legs to buckle and give way beneath him.

Howard got up quickly holding his neck with one hand and looked up at his delusional father, cringing. It all happened so fast that Howard was shocked and found it difficult to move his body. Finally, with all his strength Howard pulled free from his father’s grasp and raced wearily up the old wooden stairs as fast as his legs could carry him.

He ran to his little brother’s room at the end of the hall and banged harshly on the door.

“Nicolas, Nicolas! It’s me, open up please!” he cried.

The door opened and Howard almost fell into the room.

Immediately he turned around and slammed the door shut, locking it.

“Nic, are you alright?” Howard asked.

His little brother had multiple rash marks on him, on his thigh, his arms, and even a small one on the side of his face. It looked like he was traumatized, still holding the house phone from when he had called Howard nearly a half an hour ago. Tears ran down his face as he ran over to his older brother.

“It’s alright bro, it’s going to be alright.” Howard assured him.

“We have to leave now,” he whispered to Nicolas as he heard footsteps on the upstairs hallway floor.

“Out the window and onto the porch roof. Let’s go!” he told his little brother. Nicolas nodded and wiped the tears from his eyes.

Howard quickly unlocked and opened the window and looked outside. Nicolas went out first with Howard following closely behind. As Howard’s feet finally made it through the old window, he could hear the fists pounding at the Nicolas’s room door. The banging at the door grew louder and louder, followed by some brash mumbling from his father that he couldn’t make out. He ignored it and the two of them shimmied along the rooftop following it around to the side of the house where a few dense pine trees grew. Using it as a cushion, they took turns jumping down through them, letting the thin branches absorb the majority of their fall. Scratched, but still in one piece, the brothers headed across the driveway. Behind them they heard screams from their father as he has broken down the door and was shouting at them through the open window.

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“Over here!” I waved worriedly, catching the attention of the escapees.

“Janelle, what are you doing here!” yelled Howard.

“I’m sorry Howard, I followed you.” Howard stared at her, while supporting Nicolas with his arms.

“So I guess you saw what happened...?” he asked sadly.

“Yes, that’s horrible. Why didn’t you tell me about your father?” she said as they continued to run down the street.

“I... I just couldn’t Janelle.” he responded.

“Can we stay at your place tonight?” he asked changing the topic.

“Of course, let’s go.” she answered sharply.

We made our way a few streets over to where I lived.

When we arrived at my house, my mother was reading on the front porch. She dropped the book and rushed over to Howard and Nicolas. Inside she attended to Nicolas’s bruises and rashes, while I looked at Howard’s neck. Janelle’s father was on the phone with the police while keeping a keen eye out the front door. Eventually

his fear came true. Howard's father came roaring down the street in his old maroon pick-up truck. He parked haphazardly in the driveway and unstably got out.

Janelle's father held up his hand signaling for everyone to stay where they were. He stepped outside, closing the door securely behind him.

"Is this the Evans house!?" he screamed. My father remained calm.

"Don't play games with me, where are they? I know they're here!" Howard's father screamed as he saw Mr. Evans.

"You have no business here. You're drunk and incoherent," my father retorted.

At this, Howard's father became furious and tackled my dad to the ground. I watched from the window and was about to run out to help him when my mother firmly pulled me back by the shoulder.

On the driveway the two men wrestled for a few minutes, grabbing each other's clothes. Howard's father would throw punches when he could and my father would defend himself to the best of his ability. Finally a signal of hope pierced the ears of everyone who was witnessing the brawl. Sirens.

Two police cars pulled into the driveway with their lights flashing. A male officer stepped out of one cruiser, a female out of the other. The two officers quickly made their way over to break up the skirmish. They promptly pulled Howard's Dad off of my father, restraining him from doing any further damage.

My father slowly got up, wiping blood off of his face and onto his arm. Without saying anything, he took one more glance at his pitiful assailant before turning and heading back towards the house.

Howard's father looked almost sad now, bent over the hood of one of the cruisers while he was getting held and handcuffed by the officers. He looked as if he had finally come to the realization of all the terrible things he had done. Harshly they pulled him up from the hood of the car and escorted him to the back seat.

For the following thirty minutes the female officer took statements from my father, Howard, Nicolas, and eventually myself. After Nicolas had finished with the officer I gave him one of my leftover peanut butter M&M cookies from the bakery and wished him a happy birthday. That was the first time I had seen a smile on

Nicolas's face. My mother smiled when she saw Nicolas smiling at me. He peacefully ate the cookie and drank a glass of milk at the dining room table.

I had noticed that Howard had left the kitchen when he was done giving his statement. I went into the living room and found him lying face up on our old plaid couch, but with a pillow covering his face. Though I had never seen Howard weep, I knew he was crying. He heard me approaching and inconspicuously tried to wipe away the tears from his face. I knelt down on our couch, held his hand, and gave him a tight hug. His face came out of hiding.

I knew he was frustrated - angry, even ashamed of his father. He had never told me about how serious it was. He should have...

"I'll always be here for you, Howard." I whispered to him softly.

I watched as his frown transformed into a smile, a big smile that made me so happy inside. He gazed at me for a long while before his eyes became heavy and he fell asleep. I took off my shoes and swung my feet up onto the couch. I lay silently next to him for several minutes before I too drifted soundly to sleep.