

Hearty Heaven

By Katherine Stock

The store had closed two hours earlier, but our minds did not.

I worked part-time after school at Hearty Heaven, a smoothie store with a grumpy and gray boss who contrasted our logo of a laughing strawberry. He mostly hid in the back of the kitchen, though. That was okay because nobody had to see him, and if they did, his strange muttering and bitterness would ruin the exceptional reputation Hearty Heaven had in our small town. I wouldn't be surprised if the fruit sometimes decayed because his energy sucked the life out of them.

This day, on a Thursday night, I waited to be let back in the store after it closed ten minutes before. My manager, Eva, invited me because she liked to use the space to help coworkers who were going through a "rough time." I guess the only people she thought were struggling was me for whatever reason and three other teenagers. I went to school with two, if Eva wasn't counted, and Kai went to the high school across town. My hatred for him didn't stir complaints about that.

Eva glanced behind her shoulder, took a spare key from her pocket, looked behind her shoulder again, and opened the creaky door with clenched teeth, as if the whole FBI would track her down for making a noise.

"Hurry," Kai whispered. Everyone's shoulders tensed.

"Everything okay?" I asked, shifting my feet. Were we even supposed to be here?

I didn't want to get in trouble and give my parents more to deal with. My dad got laid off from his job as an architect, and my mom's pay alone couldn't maintain our family of five.

"Yeah, everything's fine, Vanity. I just—we need to be careful, that's all. Reggie can't know we're here after closing time." Eva pressed her lips together and stepped inside.

"That's why we had to wait till he left and pretend we already left ourselves," Ellis, a friend of mine, said. She smiled at me.

But were we capable of keeping the secret?

The air conditioning pricked needles in my skin. It was weird being here, the large, dark, square room, the blenders dead behind the counters, and no lights to make the tile floors sparkle. We didn't take off our uniforms either, not that there was time. Paintings of tropical sunsets hung on the yellow walls. They matched the faint pineapple scent in the air.

"Reggie is a crusty man." Caleb, the second kid from school, frowned and scrunched up his nose like he did when he got critical. He ran his fingers through his brown sweep of hair. "Just like my crusty family."

"He's not that bad," Ellis said. The five of us stopped at a table in the center of the shop, pulling up two extra chairs. No one turned on the lights. "He might just be...going through stuff."

Kai slumped in a chair beside me, and I tried my best not to look at him. I kept my chin up. He was lazy to a point where it shocked me he got hired, funny

for someone who had a build better than a WWE wrestler. Everyone carried drawstring bags except for me. They each pulled out notebooks, and Ellis took out a bag of chips with hers.

“All right, everyone.” Eva’s chair groaned when she scooted back. I admired her because she was a senior at my high school and already a manager of this place. “As you know, Vanity will be joining us today.”

“Um, I don’t really know why, though. I mean, it’s not like I have problems. Even if I did, I don’t need help,” I said.

“I’d like to say otherwise,” Kai said smoothly, writing in his notebook.

I sucked in a breath. “I never asked for your opinion!”

“Hey now. This is kinda what Eva brought you here for.” Caleb raised his eyebrows.

Eva nodded. “I’m concerned about your sudden anger, and well, you’re very self-assured which isn’t a bad thing, but I think it’ll keep you from realizing it yourself.”

Letting my eyes narrow, I bit the inside of my cheek. That’s where she was wrong. I was more than aware of my anger, which is why I agreed to come to this, but I didn’t need as much help. It was a phase I could deal with myself. The irritability didn’t have a particular reason. I had a tendency of hurting people’s feelings at times, and I needed to work on that.

“What happens if Reggie catches us?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Knowing him, he could fire us.” Eva’s fair cheeks sunk. She had dark hair and eyes from her Japanese mother, something she liked to mention.

My heart froze. He could fire us? I almost considered leaving. I couldn’t get fired! I had to help my family out. They’d be disappointed.

“Chill out, Vanity.” Kai sighed. “Let’s just talk.”

“I’ll start. We should all restate our problems for Vanity’s sake,” Caleb said. Ellis crunched on her chips. “My older brother died in a car crash a couple weeks ago, and it’s been so hard. Like, so hard. My family’s struggling and all I wanna do is make people smile ’cause I don’t wanna keep seeing sad people everywhere I go.” He swallowed, his breath shaking. “And I envy happy people now. No matter what I do I can’t be happy myself. My family can’t be either.”

He clenched and unclenched his fists. The watch on his wrist glimmered. I felt his pain even if I never dealt with that. It was like his energy rushed through me, a block weighing my chest. I placed my hand on his arm. Everyone was silent.

“The pain doesn’t go away, but it gets better,” Ellis said, brushing a strand of red hair behind her ear. “I lost my grandpa not long ago. Me and him were close. I’ve just had a strong desire to distract myself with things like track and work ever since. Eva says I’ve been exhausting myself ’cause of it.”

Everyone’s attention fell on Kai, who was as emotionless as always. A fire spread through me. How could he react this way after his peers spilled their feelings?

Kai stared at the table the moment he opened his mouth. “I-I...”

“It’s okay, you can do it,” Ellis said.

Eva’s face brightened. “I know you haven’t felt comfortable sharing at past meetings, but we’re all here to listen,” she said.

Kai swallowed. “I deal with bullying at my school, and it’s so stupid that I can’t stand up for myself. I feel stupid. It makes m-me feel like nothin’ is worth trying. I’m sorry if I’ve been disappointin’ you at work, especially you, Vanity.” He brought his head up to gaze at me.

His drooping eyes felt like someone stabbed me. I was an open-minded person, but I never stopped to think there was a reason behind Kai being apathetic and unmotivated. However, I couldn’t bring myself to apologize. I grabbed a piece of my long hair to distract myself.

Eva folded her hands into each other and told me, “I know you think you don’t have problems, but I’d like you to rethink that and figure out why this anger is arising. We’re all dealing with things in a negative way right now, which is fine, but it can’t stay that way forever. These coping mechanisms are deadly to our emotions.”

And that’s why I said our minds didn’t close—they were open with thought.

The next few days consisted of more sneaking around behind Reggie’s back to use Hearty Heaven as a therapist office. We filled out the notebooks with what we learned about each other and ourselves. I thought about triggers for anger

and worried about my family's financial struggle. I panicked about losing my job, but these remedial hours were valuable too. My mind became a game of tug of war.

I learned Eva enjoyed listening to us because she wanted to major in psychology for college next fall. I learned that I liked listening too, Caleb liked offering advice, Ellis *loved* to help through actions, and Kai, well, he did his own thing.

Ellis complimented Reggie every day and kept a smile on her face. She gave treats to the staff members but hogged food other days. Reggie's grimace became a smirk, and he started creeping from his habitat in the far kitchen corner. I tried to figure out what Ellis did to maintain her happiness. There were also times she was grim and a play-by-the-rules kind of person.

On Monday evening we sat at the table in the center of the room again. Clouds coated the sky out the window and left a stronger darkness to linger in the store. Caleb had to finish a project in the kitchen when a bang rumbled through the room, causing the lights to flicker on and off. Eva, Ellis, Kai, and I were on our feet faster than an angry snake. A waft of smoke brushed past my nose, and my eyes widened.

"Caleb!" I shouted.

No response came. Kai sprinted toward the kitchen's traffic doors without hesitation.

"Kai, come back, find the fire extinguisher," I called, but he didn't obey.

The smoke intensified, turning the store into a sauna as the silver toxins slithered through the door. Another sudden crash came from the kitchen. I flinched. The smoke detector blared. I exchanged glances with Ellis. She gripped on the backrest of her chair hard enough for her knuckles to turn white. Eva stepped forward.

“Not you too!” I said.

“I’m not going in there. Caleb! Kai!”

We couldn’t wait inside forever and had to leave at some point. My gaze drifted to the exit. I didn’t want to leave Kai and Caleb behind, but I had to think rationally. My head started to spin in the silence until both of them burst out of the traffic doors. Caleb nearly slipped as he came from behind the counter. His hands shook, and his breaths came quick. Water soaked through his uniform and dripped on his classy shoes. Kai reeked of smoke.

“Out!” he said. “Someone call the fire department! Now. I-I’m sorry....”

Wasting no time, we dashed out of the front doors and tried to calm Caleb down as Eva pulled out her cell phone. He explained that he spilled water by an outlet, after tripping over the chord because of how dark it was, and caused a spark. It caught on a cloth and a grease spill. My stomach churned. Not only could’ve Caleb or Kai been injured, but Reggie would find out and rid of us all. How would I help my family now?

“The fire extinguisher is in the back of the kitchen. Wouldn’t have been able to get to it with the fire gettin’ so big. We can’t mess with something like that,” Kai explained.

“Wait, so what happened to *you* in there, Caleb?” I blinked.

“Yeah, why didn’t you respond?” Ellis added.

“It wasn’t my initial reaction since I was so shocked and everything. Kai wanted to make sure I was okay, but...you really shouldn’t run toward something when there’s smoke. Not to mention a fire.” Caleb briefly rested his hand on Kai’s shoulder.

Kai shrugged. “That doesn’t matter to me.”

I peered through the window. An orange wall of fury burst out of the kitchen and consumed our blenders. It didn’t take long for the firetrucks to arrive, their sirens silencing the flame’s crackles. The five of us made a huddle, cried, and shivered because we didn’t know what would happen next. Eva had contacted Reggie.

We froze when his car pulled up to the curb. People crowded in the streets, watched the firefighters tame the blaze and pulled out their phones to take pictures. Reggie stopped in front of us, a scowl slicing his brown face as he placed his hands on his hips. His hair seemed extra ashy.

“How—”

Kai cut off his gruff voice.

“It’s my fault! I started the fire. I wanted to come here to finish something up and asked them to come with and—”

“No!” Caleb said. “It was me, sir. Kai’s trying to cover for me. We’ve been coming here after closing time for a while. We’re so sorry. Like, really sorry. It was dark, and I tripped, and...and...” He trailed off and rubbed his arms.

“It was my idea to start coming here,” Eva muttered. She bit her lip.

“But we just wanted a place to talk. We’ve been struggling and thought this would be easiest,” I said.

The shouts of people echoed around me.

To my surprise, Reggie’s furrowed eyebrows lifted. He sighed. “Ya know, I’m *profusely* angry about this. The fire, sneaking around behind my back.” He crossed his arms. “But you kids seem to have a lot to say. I wouldn’t worry too much, as long as you help rebuild this place.”

“Wait, so you’re not firing us?” Hope fluttered through me.

He shook his head. “You’re good kids, ’specially what Kai tried to do. And Ellis has been making me smile.”

It clicked at that moment. Without Ellis and her kindness and optimism, our jobs would’ve disappeared before our eyes. If Caleb hadn’t started the fire, I wouldn’t have made that realization. Kai’s bravery saved us all. Eva was our foundation. The reason I had been angry was that I worried too much about my family’s issues and never asked for help. I kept it inside. As we waited for our terrified parents to pick us up, the fire died with our tension.

After that day, we looked ahead to our futures, stayed optimistic, and helped each other using kindness to heal and stray from our deadly coping mechanisms. Hearty Heaven was better than ever, and it started two hours past closing time.

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