

Clean Hands

The stench of damp peanuts was sickening. Jobe had broken open a steaming container of them. Her eyes danced with light, convincing me she loved Henry's boiled peanuts more than candy. A sweat droplet slipped into her container, and I couldn't watch her finish it.

"Move over, Jobe,"

"Why you mad?" she taunted. "Stop, stealing stuff."

"I probably paid for 'em."

She stayed put, smiling at me.

I hated being here. We had squeezed into an opening on the left side of the store. Lady Janice was to our right, slowly peeling the lid off her container. I could only imagine how much she wasted on something so nasty.

I could put money to better use. At twelve and fifteen, it amazed me how easily Jobe and Rena settled. Ma told me to have patience with my younger siblings. They don't understand things the way I do. I fought the instinct to snatch the container and throw it away. It wasn't Jobe's fault I got caught again. I bet she didn't want to be stuck babysitting her *older* sister. I would be here doing laundry and helping after closing to fill up my Wednesdays, which meant no hunts with Kevin.

I needed entertainment. To my luck, a familiar group of boys strolled in. Smooth and loud, Leon, Eric, and Fancy filled the only seats left.

“Jobe,” I glanced at my little sister. “No business.”

“Heaven,” Eric laughed.

“We love, Lil Jobie.” Fancy poked at her head.

Fancy caught a couple of quarters falling out of a girl's hand. He handed most of them back, smiling and pocketing the other handful. The whole clan was bred thieves, but Fancy stole with charm. It wasn't as easy for me, being a girl with no ability to lie or flirt.

“Ric, I'm busted,” I said.

“Your Momma, need the lights?” Leon asked.

“She always does.”

“Isn't nex-,” Eric stopped himself.

“Work here,” I joked. “Henry makes money here, and pays his bills,”

Everyone except Fancy looked at me. He was busy watching the girl, who had walked away and counted her change.

“With quarters?” Eric questioned.

“The quarters in them bleach bottles add up.” I laughed.

I followed Jobe to where she had started taking out the clothes. They didn't laugh with me, but Henry was off-limits. Henry's Sudds was the only place they hadn't been banned from. It was the neighborhood club in July. No one had washers and dryers in our part of town. It's why Henry would go out on vacation, he'd leave the side door unlocked for some people. Eric smiled at Leon, pulling my clothes out of the dryer for me.

A Week Later

The entrance bell jangled and squealed with the excitement of my timely arrival. I expected to squeeze by all over again and see Janice eating. The bell kept bustling and clanking. Echoing from each corner of the store, bringing my attention to 'OPEN' written in orange print flipped on the wrong side.

I peered into a cold, grey, laundry room. The bell's insatiable ringing was swallowed by silence. Henry more than likely left the store unlocked on his vacation.

"Henry?"

He poked his sugar-colored mane from the side of the counter.

"Heaven?" he smiled. "Good job this month."

"Thank you, Hen."

He pulled out an empty mixing pot.

“You closed, today?”

“You done hanging with hoodlums?”

He seemed to mean that, and I had no rebuttal, so I grabbed the thin ladle resting in the pot. The television was pitch black, soaking up Henry’s smile. Reflecting our shadowy figures and making the room feel like a fun house mirror.

“They took it all,”

“Took what?” I questioned. “You got robbed?”

“No.”

Henry slammed two empty bleach bottles on the plastic countertop. The vibration rung through my fingers like an electric pulse. I never saw him this upset. My chest was pumped with guilt and betrayal knowing exactly who he meant. We promised to never harm our own neighborhood.

“You press charges?”

He flipped the bottle upside down.

HEAVEN’S COLLEGE

“You decide.”

Jobe mixed the quarters with small pebbles she found on the road. She broke a machine like that once. I pretended she did it again. It was easier to calculate the amount he and I both lost two days ago. I wanted to spill my guts and out myself. My face felt swollen with the need to cry but I shrugged my shoulders.

Anyone who ever said not telling the full truth is not a lie didn't feel my belly turn. His nostrils widened, taking a greedy part of all the air in my atmosphere. Henry had the disappointed look only father figures and guilt-tripping mothers could give. I tightened up after that. None of those boys saw my face again, I didn't need another reason to go to Henry's Sudds.