

The Sin of a Smile by Alaina Kass

I didn't want to punch anyone, I didn't. I like to keep my head down, my mouth shut, and all my thoughts to myself. But when the tall boy that was brought to the orphanage last week came up to me and said that my parents probably gave me up because of how I don't smile, I didn't take time to explain that they passed away, I just swung. I let go of all my pent-up anger toward every single individual I'd endured who said that to me before. I released it all into his jaw, letting my knuckles crack against him in a way that would put slow-motion movie sequence punches to shame, and I watched as he fell to the floor of the dining room. But when I looked over at Michael, the staff came up behind me and dragged me up the spiral stairs behind the kitchen, steel cooling the bottoms of my feet as I fell limp in their arms.

My hands rubbed together, tracing circles around the pain, and trying to distract myself from my leg shaking uncontrollably underneath me. The Directress' office has always been seen as cold, horror stories from past kids who talk about how they are certain she keeps kids who were said to be "adopted" in her closet, but those stories didn't even do justice to the chill the room hit me with. Her voice pierced through the office's silence, slicing into me as my leg suddenly stopped shaking.

"Enola Casimer." Her tone was strong enough to break glass, one of the reasons there were most likely no windows in the attic building she called a workspace. I walked toward her, letting myself only glance at the broken button that covered her left eye. Her office was more haunted than the lobby, with clocks constantly ticking and old family photos from when she was young staring at you from rows and rows of shelving behind her. She forced me into my seat and then sat herself across from me, sinking into her chair as though she had never left it.

“I am so sorry Ms. Neva. I don’t know why I hit him, I shouldn’t have.” Sitting in front of her was like agony, words left my mouth before I could even decide what exactly I was going to say.

“Don’t lie, Enola, you know why you hit him. I know why you hit him. You shouldn’t have, but your reasoning is valid. You will apologize, but Michael will also be punished. However, I do have something else for you to do for me.” Unlike me, she was strategized with her words.

“What is it?” My leg slowly stopped shaking, but I knew she could still hear the shake of my voice as I spoke.

“We have a new kid, Dylan, who is coming into the orphanage tomorrow. I want you to show him around.”

“Why me? Shouldn’t one of the other boys do it?”

“No, I think it will be good for you to open yourself up and hopefully be able to have a friend. Will you do it?”

“Okay.”

The staff woke me up extra early on Tuesday, getting me ready to go meet Dylan before all the other kids could overwhelm him. They walked down the corridor with me, the same way I had walked up to Ms. Neva’s office the previous day. The corridor was silent, I couldn’t even hear the sounds of the birds singing outside yet, they might have still been asleep. Walking over to Dylan was scary, he was the same age as me they had said, but it was still intimidating to be expected to lead him around. He smiled at me, and I instantly cringed that I couldn’t do it back. Instead, I stuck out my hand, holding it out for him to shake.

“Hi, I’m Enola. I’m gonna show you around.” My voice was a lot calmer than it was in Ms. Neva’s office, so I doubt he was able to sense my worry.

“I’m Dylan.” He on the other hand seemed like he was going to scream, but that isn’t surprising. He’s here, and an orphanage is never the place you want to end up.

After the staff asked him a few questions, they sent us off to explore the place he would call home from now on. It was massively uneventful, except for when we finally got to the elephant in the room.

“Do you ever smile?” It didn’t seem hostile, just a genuine question.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Why would I? Look where we are.”

“I’m gonna make you smile eventually.”

“Good luck with that.”

The day after Dylan was introduced to the orphanage, he sat with me at lunch. A room-temperature turkey sandwich and an apple sat on his tray, and his eyes glanced over to mine as he formed a grin.

“Great minds do think alike.” His voice had a twinge to it, a little mocking but overall kind. A lot different from how kids here normally spoke.

“Why aren’t you sitting with any of the boys?” I didn’t mean for it to come out as hostile as it did.

“Well, first off, they aren’t as nice to look at. And, second off, they don’t have as good taste in lunch as you and I do.” I barely heard the second part. They aren’t as nice to look at. Pink

lined under my eyes, but a smile never formed. Dylan deflated slightly, but quickly his shoulders picked back up and he grabbed his apple.

“Did you hear about the fish they recently tested in Boston? Apparently, it had a massive IQ.”

“No, we don’t really hear about that stuff here.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. He was apparently very sofishticated. Get it? So-fish-ticated?” His teeth glared at me, and it took everything in me to not give in and smile back.

The next few weeks led to nothing different. Dylan sat with me at lunch every single day and struck faces at me, told me his corniest knock-knock jokes, and complimented me to the point of a blush. It was good, to finally have a friend. He made life feel different, easier even. But never once did he make me smile. He was too sweet, he didn’t deserve that.

It was Dylan’s two-month anniversary of being at the orphanage when he didn’t sit across from me at lunch. I couldn’t find him anywhere. Over the two months, we had gotten attached at the hip, but he wasn’t even in the same room I was that morning. The staff seemed wary of me, but that wasn’t unusual. My day was pretty normal aside from Dylan not being there. Except for when they called me back up to Ms. Neva. It was the same as before, two men practically dragging me up the stairs, rubbing my hands together in her waiting room, and her commanding voice forcing me into her office. However, this time, she didn’t look the slightest bit angry, she looked sympathetic.

“Enola, I’m sure you noticed Dylan’s absence today.”

“Yeah, it was weird without him not being at lunch with me. What happened? Was he adopted?” I tried to stop my voice from shaking like I did before, I refused to cry over the fact that a boy I met two months ago didn’t say goodbye to me.

“No Enola, he wasn’t adopted. It happened.”

“What happened?”

“You smiled at him.”

“Wait, what? That isn’t possible, I didn’t let myself smile at him.” My heart pounded against my chest. I had prepared myself for everything, except for this.

“You had fallen asleep, and he had come into your room to see if you were still awake. We saw it on the hall cameras. We didn’t see what happened when he went into your room, but all we know is that in the morning he was gone.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.” The world was spinning and my cheeks felt slightly damp as salted tears escaped my eyelids. He did it. He made me smile.

“I’m sorry Enola, but the good thing is we cleaned everything before other kids woke up. No one will ever know.” And with that, she dismissed me back to my room to let me cry myself back to sleep.

It was three days after I smiled at Dylan that I stood staring in the bathroom. I didn't blink, I just stood there, facing the mirror, and then smiled at my reflection, baring my teeth toward the glass and taking a deep breath. Slowly, I melted. I didn't scream, I just let it happen. I burned through my core until nothing was left but a puddle next to the bathroom sink.

The nurses ran through the halls, I could hear them, fists pounding as they broke down the door. A sigh of defeat left their lips as they reached into the cabinet next to the sink.

"Crap, we are out of Clorox in here. Can you go grab it from the supply room?"

"Got it, anything else?"

"Grab a Target bag, we'll bury her in the backyard. No one has to know."