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OPEN EYES

AN ORIGINAL SHORT STORY

“There was blood...Blood everywhere. But now the police are trying to cover it up.”

Kendra Michaels stared at Janet Sanders in the parking lot outside her office. The woman was carrying on like a paranoid lunatic, but Kendra knew better. She had known Janet too long.

“Slow down, Janet. Where was the blood?”

Janet took a deep breath. “My fiancé’s house. I saw it three nights ago. I went over there and saw it. He was gone, but there was blood all over his kitchen floor and walls!” She shuddered. “It scared me, Kendra.”

“Understandable.” Kendra was attempting to process the disturbing information Janet was hurling at her. She hadn’t even known her old friend had a fiancé. She certainly hadn’t expected to see Janet waiting for her outside the medical office building where Kendra based her music therapy practice. She had just seen her last client of the day and was heading to her car when Janet suddenly approached her.

Kendra tried to remember how long it had been since she had seen Janet. A year? Maybe two?

Janet Sanders had been her teacher at the Woodland Institute for the Vision Impaired more than a decade before, during Kendra’s teenage years. A lifetime ago, Kendra thought, when she was still blind and living in the darkness. Janet had helped her learn how to live in that world.

No, not just to live there; Janet had shown her how to flourish as a sightless person, to feel beautiful and worthy at an age when she might have felt strange and awkward. Then, just a few years later, when Kendra gained her sight via a revolutionary stem cell procedure, Janet had been one of her first visitors, doing everything in her power to help her adjust to an exciting yet bewildering new world.

Now, however, Janet was anything but the calm and reassuring presence Kendra had always known her to be. Her clothes were disheveled, and her mop of blond hair was falling over her eyes. Her hands were jammed into the pockets of her oversized sweater. She looked as if she hadn’t slept in days.

“Calm down.” Kendra motioned toward a large bench just a few feet down the sidewalk. “Let’s sit down, okay?”

“I don’t need to sit down, Kendra, I just—”

“You do need to sit down. You’re starting to hyperventilate.” Kendra took Janet by the arm, guided her to the bench, and sat with her. “I need you to slow down. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Janet nodded and took a moment to catch her breath. “Okay. I’ve been dating this guy for a year. His name is Dale Baylor, and we met in the Sierra Club.” She moistened her lips. “He’s pretty

special, Kendra. I never thought I could feel this way about anyone. You know my job was my whole life.”

“And there were a lot of us who were grateful you felt that way. You’re a great teacher, Janet.”

“I love my students. I love my job. It makes me feel worthwhile. But Dale...He made me feel beautiful. He told me that inside and out I was wonderful. I know I’m not pretty, but when he tells me I am I believe him.”

“You should believe him. You are wonderful, Janet.”

“That’s not important.” She gestured impatiently. “What’s happened to Dale is the only thing that matters right now. I spend pretty much every weekend at his place. But when I went over last Friday night, the door had been busted open.... And there was blood.” Tears welled in Janet’s eyes. “So much blood, Kendra.”

“Where?” Kendra asked.

“Everywhere, like I said. All over the kitchen floor, some splattered on the walls and even the cabinets. And Dale was gone. But his wallet, keys, and cell phone were on the counter.”

“What about his car?”

“Still in the driveway. I can’t tell you how scared I was. I got out of there and called the police. They met me back there and took my statement. The forensics team went over the place, and they took pictures and video. There was a detective in charge, his name was Sutker, and he seemed like a nice guy. He said he would be in touch.”

“Has he called you?”

“Hell, no. I called them about a hundred times over the weekend. No one was ever available to take my call, so I left messages. No one called me back.”

“That would not be unheard of, especially on a weekend and if the police hadn’t made any progress.”

“Well, I went back to Dale’s house Sunday—last night—to get a few things of mine. I brought some friends with me. My key didn’t work on the front door. The lock had been replaced and the broken door frame had been repaired and painted. So I tried my key on the back door, and it opened. All of Dale’s things were gone, and so were mine.” She shook her head in bewilderment. “It was as if he’d never lived there. And there was no trace of the blood.”

“It had been cleaned?”

“More like cleaned out. No furniture, no car, no food in the refrigerator. I mean, it was empty. My friends probably thought I had made the whole thing up. If they hadn’t already met Dale, they might have thought I’d made him up.”

“Maybe a family member of his cleared it.”

“He had no family. Anyway, I staked out the police station this morning and waited for Detective Sutker. While I waited, I called him a few times. They kept saying he was busy and that he would call me back. Same old runaround. Finally I spotted him, and I blocked his car with mine.”

“Not a good idea, Janet.”

“Yeah, for a second I thought he was going to shoot me. But I wasn’t going to let him get away without answering a few questions.”

“And did he?”

“He practically called me a liar.”

“What?”

“He said I was being hysterical and that I was exaggerating. That there was no sign of a break-in, and that what little blood may have been on the scene could have been from a carving accident or maybe from a tin-can lid. He said there was nothing unusual about the scene.”

“What? He said that with a straight face?”

“Absolutely. He told me that I just needed to get on with my life and get used to the fact that Dale had left me. He said it wasn’t unusual for women to manufacture stories like this when faced with romantic rejection. He said it makes it easier for women to deal with.”

Kendra bit her lip. “Hmm. Charming guy.”

“That’s why I came here. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Kendra leaned closer to her friend. “You know I’m always happy to see you, Janet, but what made you come to me?”

“I need help. Dale needs help.” Janet glanced around and lowered her voice. “And I’ve heard things about you.”

“What things?” Kendra asked warily.

“That you sometimes help the police.”

She had been afraid this was where Janet was heading. It was a side of her life she didn't often discuss, even with her friends and family. "And where did you hear this?"

"From Lynne, our school administrator. I think she speaks to your mother fairly often."

Kendra nodded. Her mother. Of course.

"The teachers at the school still talk about you all the time, and not just because you can see now. You were amazing even when you were just fourteen years old. The first time I met you, you knew that I was wearing glasses, what kind of shoes I was wearing, what I had eaten for breakfast, and that I had spent the previous night with my boyfriend. Even when you were blind, you saw the world more clearly than anyone."

Kendra shrugged. "I used what I had."

"You used it like no one I've ever seen. And I've seen thousands over the years. And you're even more amazing now that you have your sight."

"I don't take anything I see for granted, that's all. After all those years of seeing nothing, I just want to absorb every detail and know what things mean."

Janet nodded. "And what details have you used to figure me out today, Kendra?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. I've known you too long. I could sit here and tell you what I've been doing, but you probably already knew in the first twenty seconds. Tell me."

"Janet, I don't see why I should waste your time—"

"I need to know I didn't come here for nothing. Tell me."

Kendra sighed. "You're still volunteering at the ballet, but for some reason you've been focusing on the American Ballet Theatre instead of the San Diego Ballet Company, even though it meant driving all the way down to Costa Mesa every night when they were in town last week. And you did drive down there five nights in a row when they were performing Giselle, didn't you?"

Janet stared at her for a long moment. "Okay, that's amazing, even for you."

"And even though you were upset and spent the morning staking out the police station, you didn't come right here, did you? You still pulled it together enough to go to work and teach a swimming class this afternoon."

"There was no one else qualified to fill in. The kids would have been disappointed."

“Of course they would. I would have been when I was your student. And you’re still fond of those overpriced coffee drinks. You had one on your way over here.”

Janet brushed her lapel. “Don’t tell me I spilled some on myself.”

“Not a drop. But it’s possible you may have spilled some on the seat of your new Volkswagen Bug.” Kendra pointed to a yellow VW parked just a few feet away. “That one. Nice car. It suits you.”

Janet smiled for the first time since confronting Kendra. “There must be fifty cars in this lot. How did you know it was mine?”

“Modern-day VW’s have a unique fob that swings out the ignition key with the press of a button, kind of like a switchblade knife.”

“But you couldn’t see it. It’s been in my sweater pocket the whole time.”

“Along with your hand. You’ve opened and closed it a few times since we’ve been sitting here. Nervous habit? I couldn’t see it, but I could hear it. It’s a very distinctive sound. There’s only one Volkswagen in this entire lot, so that has to be yours.” Kendra pointed to the car. “I see five parking stubs on your dashboard with Segerstrom Center for the Arts clearly printed at the top of each. None show a great deal of sun fading, meaning that they were put there recently, no more than a week or so, and probably on consecutive days, since there is some variation, but not a lot, in the fading between the various tickets. I happen to know that ABT’s production of Giselle played there Tuesday through Saturday last week, so it wasn’t a great leap to figure that your volunteer work has recently been centered in Costa Mesa.”

“And the swimming class? My hair is dry.”

“It is. But I can still smell the chlorine. It’s kind of hard to miss even after you’ve shampooed. I have fond memories of that school’s over-chlorinated pool.”

“What about my iced coffee? Was that just a guess?”

“They’re all guesses. I work the odds based on my observations.” Kendra pointed back to the trash can next to the building entrance. “There’s a clear coffee drink cup in the trash over half full of ice with no trace of any melting, meaning that the last of the liquid had been slurped up just seconds earlier. I didn’t see anyone entering the building or leaving the parking lot, so I’m thinking it was yours.”

Janet nodded. “You never disappoint, Kendra. It doesn’t surprise me that the police come to you for help.”

“But I’m not a cop. I’ve helped the FBI on a few cases, but my work is in this building, helping people and doing academic research. I don’t want to be anything but a music therapist.”

“I know, and believe me, I wouldn’t be here if I had any idea where else to go. If the police won’t help me, what else can I do?”

Kendra stared at Janet for a long moment. She resented the intrusion that her occasional investigative work made in her life, but this was different. Janet was a friend, and she was clearly distraught. And what’s more, Kendra owed her. When would she ever get another chance to repay Janet for all the wonderful things she had done for her?

“I’m really not sure what I can do for you, Janet.”

“Okay. Okay,” Janet said jerkily and jumped to her feet. “I knew it was a long shot when I came here. I’m sorry I bothered you with this, Kendra.”

Kendra took her arm. “But I’m willing to try. Of course I’ll help you any way I can.” Kendra stood up. “Normally I might like to see his house, but if it’s been cleaned out like you say, that might not do us much good.”

Janet breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re going to do it? So where do we start?”

Kendra thought for a moment. “Go back to your place and gather every piece of information you have on Dale. Every photo, every vacation video, and everything that belonged to him. I’d also like the name of every friend he has. Is he on any of the social networking sites?”

“No. He says he doesn’t believe in that stuff. And he says he doesn’t keep in touch with anyone from his past. He says he’d rather look forward than back.”

“Where did he work?”

“He ran a business out of his house. Computer support for local businesses.”

“Interesting. And he doesn’t believe in using computers to promote his business?”

“He said that his business only makes him aware how insecure our personal information is on the Internet.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue with that.”

“I’ll pull his stuff together. Do you want to meet tomorrow?”

“No. Tonight. The sooner I get started, the better chance I’ll have of helping you.” Kendra walked toward her car. “I’ll be at your place in an hour.”