

HIS HOODIE

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It was just my luck to be locked out of the house on a day when the sky was being emotional. Heaven knows where my parents skipped off to, and my dumb brain succeeded in forgetting my keys. Again. I was hopeful, because our kitchen window could have been a sweet spot for any robber who paid attention. But my hands just slipped hopelessly across its stubborn face, unable to budge it.

I decided it was just another bad day. But it ended up being the day I met Nolan.

Nolan was the new kid that I heard the girls whispering about in the school bathrooms, discussing his good looks and pitying him for having to switch high schools. I had never spoken to Nolan. He seemed perfectly ordinary when I saw him on the school bus that morning, bundled in his black hoodie just like the rest of us. But he had thanked our bus driver, and already knew him by name.

Next door, Nolan's driveway was still clogged with a dismal moving truck. I was water-logged and shivering, and the warm light streaming through the windows of his house offered hope. I realized desperation is good motivation. A moment later I found myself on his doorstep, knocking.

In just moments the door swung open, a flood of warmth enveloping me, and the light making the raindrops shimmer. But I didn't even get the chance to introduce myself before Nolan pulled me out of the rain. Then his mom appeared out of nowhere.

"You poor thing," she fussed.

They immediately outfitted me in dry clothes. Nolan even lent me his hoodie. The inside of it was still soft, and the fabric was fresh and crisp. It must have been brand new.

My head struggled to grasp their hospitality, because strangers aren't supposed to be treated like old friends.

I was unsure about spending the whole evening with unfamiliar neighbors, and I kept biting the sleeve of his hoodie, forgetting it wasn't mine. But the floor became our playground, and there was no such thing as awkward silence. Nolan marveled at how many skittles I was able to munch. He flinched, his nose wrinkling as I touched our game's dice with my sticky, colorful fingers.

"Shameful," he teased, clicking his tongue.

We kept stepping on the tiny plastic pyramid pieces as we battled for world domination, laughing until our sides ached. It was after eleven when my parents finally came home, but I didn't mind. I was happier than I had been in a long time.

A few nights later there was a clatter against my window. I poked my head through my curtains. Nolan was right across the way, smirking from his open window. I slid my window up too. But when I opened my mouth to speak Nolan's hands started flying wildly in front of him, shushing me. I clamped my hand over my mouth, embarrassed that I'd almost hollered in the dead of night.

Nolan disappeared for a moment, then suddenly, a crumpled ball of paper came sailing through my window, and bounced off my stomach. Nolan muffled a chuckle. I retrieved the paper from the floor and smoothed out the wrinkles. It had been weighted with a small pack of clattering skittles. I smiled. His phone number was scrawled across the top, with a note underneath.

P.S.

Close your window, Skittles. It's freezing out.

His window clunked shut. Goosebumps popped up all over my arms from the frigid air, and I lowered mine too. When I looked back up, Nolan was wobbling his phone by his ear. I dialed his number and he answered immediately.

"That's better, isn't it?"

I leaned against the window frame, feeling strangely calmed by the sound of his voice. I nodded.

He smiled. "You still have my clothes, you know," he said, lifting a playful eyebrow.

"I supposed you better come over tomorrow after school to get your stuff."

The corners of his mouth twitched upward, and I shook my head teasingly, knowing that he'd wanted me to say that.

"I thought you'd never ask."

He came over after school the next day to pick up his stuff. We chatted on the living room floor so late into the night that my parents finally had to kick him out. But after he went home, he called and we sat in front of our windows, gazing at each other through the pale moonlight, talking 'til we couldn't keep

our eyes open.

A few weeks later, after several hours of exploring the Nether, and fighting Demogorgons with Harrington, I found his hoodie on our couch, crumpled and half stuffed between the cushions. I noticed his initials were scribbled onto the tag in sloppy capital letters. I decided it would be funny to wear it to school the next day, and see if he noticed.

Nolan chuckled and shook his head when he saw me, but he said nothing.

Nolan's hoodie hung to the middle of my thighs. The sleeves would bunch around my forearms, and when I let them loose, the floppy material was perfect for whacking Nolan. I wore it all the time. Then one night, over the click and snap of our LEGOS as we built an elaborate city, he kept eyeing the hoodie.

"You want it back, don't you?"

Nolan shrugged. "Well, it is my favorite hoodie."

I gave it back to him at the end of the night, but his head drooped, as though he felt badly for taking it from me. After that, I couldn't help but notice him wearing it every night when we talked.

Only a couple weeks later, after playing ping pong—which ended up being more like fetch—he left his hoodie at my house again. I quickly shrugged it on. The fuzz on the inside wasn't silky soft anymore, but it was somehow comfier. After climbing into bed, I pulled the hood up over my head, snuggling into the hoodie as though it were giving me a hug. The hoodie smelled like Nolan.

"You lost the drawstring," I complained one evening, settling myself in front of the window.

"And you chewed a hole in the sleeve."

I yanked the fraying sleeve out of my mouth and tucked it deep into the kangaroo pouch pocket, my cheeks flushing.

We talked 'til the sun was nearly ready to rise, and I had dozed. Nolan cleared his throat, rousing me.

"Go to bed, Skittles," he whispered.

Not a day passed that we didn't talk, and not a month went by without the hoodie being exchanged between us. I figured he was leaving it on purpose. But I didn't know why he always took it back and left it again every two weeks, like clockwork.

"It's about time for you to take your hoodie back," I mused one night, while we assembled the border of a Kinkadee painting.

"Nah. Not for another two days," he absentmindedly replied, while fitting a piece into place.

"Why's that?" I prodded.

He looked up at me, smiling mischievously, like he was onto to me. I got a little lost in his eyes.

"Because, when I take it home, I want it to smell like you."

I blushed. I was pretty sure he did too. Of course I liked him, but I also had been content to just be his friend. Nolan leaned closer 'til I could feel his breath on my face, and my heart went wild, barely contained by its cage. He pushed forward, planting a gentle kiss right on my lips, and I was sure my heart would break free. It felt too good to be real. He felt too good to be real.

Now I know that good things, good things like him, just don't last.

The doctors have lost hope. Nolan's mom is a wreck.

I keep thinking I've cried all my tears. But they don't stop. I mock the rain, because not even a weeping sky can fathom all the tears I've shed.

I sit next to his bed. There's the constant beep, reporting the beat of his heart. There are tubes strapped to him, needles poking him. His sparse breaths come in deep rasps. Pools of shadow have gathered in his gaunt cheeks. His skin is ashen white.

I used to crawl into the lumpy hospital bed beside him, fitting my body up against his, hiding in the crook of his arm.

"I brought you flowers today," I whispered.

"Why'd you do that? That's supposed to be my job."

His bony fingers would stroke my hair. I would press my face against him and inhale. But the sterilized hospital had long since smothered his familiar scent. I would close my eyes, I would hold him tight, and I would try to imagine that everything was normal. But it never felt normal, and tears relentlessly rolled down my cheeks. He smiled at me. He could still smile then, but his eyes didn't.

"Don't cry, Skittles. Don't make goodbye harder."

Now he lies still. The doctors say I need to keep my distance, because he is too weak. The flowers by his bedside are dried up, their shriveled petals sprinkling the table. They were so fragrant, bursting with color and life. Has it only been a week, and they are already faded and wilting?

I'm wearing his hoodie. The hole on the sleeve is so large that I can stuff my thumb right through it. The tag is all curled up, and Nolan's initials are faded. It's been a month since he got sick, and it doesn't smell like him anymore.

I hug myself, gripping handfuls of the tattered hoodie. His hoodie.