Be Nice to the Kid

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My friends tell me that I have a problem, that I have this unnecessary need to save people. My mom says that I am a pleaser, someone who puts others before herself. That is usually the case. It was this way with Alan. I have always enjoyed being social, and spending time with friends. My friend Emily’s house is the place to be on the weekends. Her parents are really lenient, and they always give Emily money to provide food, beverages, and movies for us. Out of all of my friends Emily is my favorite. She is one of those people who is nice to everyone, and she doesn’t judge people, like some of my other friends.

“Hey Emily! Who is that kid on your couch?” I question, playing with the drink in my hand.

“That’s Alan, the neighbor kid. He is kinda strange, not too many friends. Ha, he is right up your alley,” Emily replies in a smug tone before leaving to make her rounds, and attend to the other guests at her party.

I take a moment and examine Alan. His hair is black with wirey curls that stand like a bush on his head. He is wearing a stained shirt that I am almost certain came from a second hand shop. He is barefoot, and his naked feet are grass-stained. There are papers spread over his lap and a book sits in front of him on the coffee table amongst empty beer cans and red plastic cups. I watch as he scrunches his nose in attempts to push his glasses back into place on his round face, as he stares down at one of the papers. Intrigued, I walk to the couch ready to investigate.

“Looks like you’re working hard, there” I say, taking a seat next to him. Alan looks up at me, startled, and gives me a smirk.

“Yeah, stupid homework,” he says, glancing at me. He shuffles the papers on his lap, and organizes them into a neat pile.

“So I hear you live next door. Do you come over here often?” I lean in a little closer and examine the paper.

“Yeah, Emily lets me come over sometimes. I don’t like it when there are a lot of people here though. No one really talks to me,” Alan says. He looks up and smiles.

“Well I don’t see why people wouldn’t talk to you. Ya seem cool to me,” I say back. Alan stares at me and his cheeks turn a pale pink as he blushes. His eyes quickly dart back down to the paper and he fiddles with the
pencil in his hand. I lean in, pick up the book off of the coffee table and flip through its pages.

“I can help you with this if you want. I remember going over this stuff last year.” My voice is sweet and sincere. Alan nods in approval.

I pull my car up to Emily’s house and park on the side of the street in front of her yard. I look over at the grey house that sits to the right of Emily’s. Alan is sitting on the front porch next to an older, larger woman. I jump out of my car and turn towards Alan’s house.

“Hey Alan!” I yell waving and walking his direction. Alan looks up at me and springs to his feet. The woman smiles a little and turns to Alan with a questioning look on her face.

“Hey.” He yells back, and walks to the top of the porch’s wooden steps.

“How are you doin?” I ask and shake Alan’s hand and then turn to face the woman still sitting on the bench swing. “Hello there, I’m Hayley,” I say letting go of Alan’s hand, offering it to the woman.

“I’m doing ok,” Alan replies. “This is my mom. Mom this is the girl that helped me finish my homework,” he says, nodding his head in my direction.

Alan’s mother is morbidly obese and has weak knees. Her long brown hair is slicked back and held with a scrunchy like a cinnamon roll on top of her head. She is wearing a large sleeveless dress as a top with a pair of athletic shorts underneath. She has a bag of potato chips on her lap and a large fountain pop from the gas station sits next to her on the bench.

“Get her a soda,” she snaps at Alan, who is still standing beside me. “Would you like something to eat honey? Go ahead and take a seat.” She points to an open lawn chair. I turn towards the chair and sink down into it. Alan returns to the porch with a can of pop and hands it to me before taking a seat on a plastic red milk crate next to my chair.

“I’m not hungry, but thank you,” I reply, opening the can of pop. I sit on the porch and talk with Alan and his mother for almost an hour. We joke about how annoying homework is, and Alan’s mother recalls stories from Alan’s childhood that I can tell for him are mildly embarrassing.

“You know, if you would like to make some cash, I could use somebody to drive Alan around and pick up groceries from the store for us,” Alan’s mom says when I finally stand up to leave.

“I would love to help you guys out, and I would love hanging out with Alan,” I reply before finally heading over to Emily’s house.
“I love this restaurant,” Emily says as we walk into Spaghetti Works. “I know! I crave this place all the time.” We examine our menus and sip on the waters the peppy brown-haired waitress has brought us. “So what is the deal with you and Alan? Is he your boyfriend?” Emily finally says holding back a giggle with a sly smirk on her face. “Oh shut up! He is a nice kid and I feel bad for him.” I take a sip of my water. “His mom is really nice too. Poor lady can hardly move though.” I look up at Emily as she rolls her eyes. “Well you have been spending an awful lot of time with them lately. Don’t get too attached you know. They are just another one of your cases.” Emily looks at me and frowns a little. “I won’t get attached. They are just nice people and I feel bad for them. Give me a break.” I rise from the table and head to the salad bar.

Emily and I sit and eat our salads and spaghetti as she continues to pester me about Alan and his mother. Why can’t I just do something nice for someone? Wouldn’t she want me to do the same for her if she was in Alan’s situation? She tells me how our other friends think Alan is strange and creepy, and that they think it’s weird that I help them out every time Alan or his mother call me. “Hayley, I’m just afraid of what the other girls are going to think.” Emily looks up at me and I can tell she is serious. I look down at my plate and twirl the spaghetti around with my fork. Would my friends really ditch me because of my relationship with Alan and his mom? I don’t want to lose my friends. “Thank you for taking me to get clothes,” Alan hollers as he sets an arm full of clothes down on the bench in the dressing room. “No problem! You could use some new ones,” I reply as I flip through a magazine and wait for him to try stuff on. I am just happy that he let me take him to get something new, rather than used clothing like he normally gets. I continue to flip though my magazine until Alan finally emerges from the dressing room. He is wearing a pair of dark denim jeans that I picked out, and a yellow polo shirt. “So what do you think about this outfit? I like it the most,” Alan says as he pulls at the bottom of the shirt and smoothes it out over the top of the jeans. “You look cute!” I examine Alan, and he looks like a totally different person. I notice that he even combed his hair today, something that he never does.
“Well if you think I look good, then that is all that matters.” Alan checks himself out in the mirror for a good minute before facing me again. “Hayley, we should go get dinner and hang out sometime,” he says as he flashes me a huge grin, “you really are an awesome friend.”

“Well you look good Alan. Anything else you want to try on?” I try to remain enthusiastic and avoid the proposition for Alan’s sake. I’m just helping you out, I think to myself as I walk towards the dressing room to help sort through all of the clothes that he tried on.

This is how I imagined Alan the day it happened:

It was a Friday afternoon. The skies were overcast, and it was windy. Get home before it rains, and finish chapter seven, he thought.

Alan walked home from school like he did every weekday. There was nothing extraordinary about the day, and for the most part it had been rather boring. Alan kicked a soda can three blocks through the neighborhood until he found his street. He sighed when he made it to his driveway and walked up the wooden porch stairs and into the house. The television was on and a pot of soup sat cooking on the stove. Besides the yammering of voices on the television the house was quiet. An eerie quiet that made him uncomfortable.

“Mom!” Alan called out into the cluttered living room.

He continued walking through the room examining the space around him. His mother’s recliner was in the upright position and the T.V. tray she always used was covered in a delicate white powder and surrounded by wadded napkins. Alan inched closer to the tray brushing his fingers over the powder letting it collect on his fingertips. A small vial lay on the ground next to the chair and an open pill bottle lay next to it spilling out pills of all colors and shapes onto the carpet. Alan leaned over and swept the pills back into the bottle and placed it on top of the powder covered tray. He turned around and saw the flickering light of a television coming from beneath his mother’s bedroom door. He then stared at the door for a moment, took a deep breath, and walked to the bedroom.

“Mom, can I come in?” Alan said gently while tapping on the door frame. Getting no response Alan slowly nudged at the bedroom door pushing it open. He saw his mother lying in bed, the comforter draped over her legs, coming to rest at her waist. Alan crept to the side of the bed and placed a hand on his mother’s arm.

“Mom wake up! Mom?” He said shaking her slowly. Alan leaned over his mother’s face which looked a grayish blue. Alan brought his hand to her
face and wiped away the white foam that oozed from her mouth and covered her lips. Her face was cold against his hand.

“MOM! Mom wake up!” he shrieked leaning in and shaking her. She didn’t respond and her body didn’t move. Alan climbed onto the bed and stroked his mother’s hair while dialing the only number he could think of on his cell phone.

Alan sat beside his mother’s lifeless body and kept hitting the redial button. Tears streaked his face as he called his only friend. The only person that he thought he could count on. His mother was now a pale blue, and the foam on her lips was dry.

“Pick up, Please pick up,” Alan whispered to himself. He stayed there for over an hour until the smoke alarm went off in the kitchen as the soup boiled over into the burner. Emily’s father knocked on Alan’s door after hearing the alarm ring for several minutes.

Emily, the girls and I are rummaging through the racks of clothes at various stores in the mall. We are taking turns trying on goofy outfits that we pick out for one another. It has been a fun afternoon so far and we are happy to have a day off of school to spend having fun with each other. The girls give me a little grief at first for spending so much time with Alan and his mother, but they finally stopped—until my phone rings. I am in the dressing room slipping into an outfit that my grandmother would wear when Emily yells that my phone was ringing.

“Who is it?” I holler back from behind the dressing room door.

“It’s Alan,” She says giggling a little. I can hear the other girls begin to laugh and make kissy noises. They whisper things like “freak”, “weirdo”, and “boyfriend” while laughing.

“I’ll just call him back later. Don’t worry about it” I say. If I answer what are they going to think of me? They will probably stop hanging out with me if I take the time to talk to him now.

“He is calling again. Three times in a row. That’s pretty impressive,” I hear Emily say a few minutes later. I am back in the dressing room this time changing into the clothes I wore to the mall. The girls begin to laugh and mock me again. Stupid Alan. I know I am his only friend, but doesn’t he understand that I have a reputation? I exit the dressing room and grab my phone from Emily’s hand. We roam the mall for awhile but I’m not interested anymore. I can’t get over how angry I am with Alan, and how he’s embarrassed me in front of my friends.

I leave the mall and go home, still angry. I change into a pair of sweat pants and snuggle into my bed and turn on the television. I look at
my phone. Thirty two missed calls. Jesus Christ, Alan, that is almost stalkerish. I fluff my pillow until I’m comfortable and watch a few shows until I fall asleep.

“Hayley wake up! Phone for you!” I hear my mom yell up the stairs. I rub my eyes and wake myself up. My cell phone blinks red, signaling that I have a message. I examine my phone and see that Emily has called and left me a voicemail. Pulling the covers off of me I walk into the hallway and pick up the house phone.

“Hello?” I say, yawning a little.

“Hayley?” Emily’s voice is dry. “Hayley, Alan found his mother dead yesterday.” I hang up the phone, without saying a word, in disbelief and walk back to my room. I pick up my phone and look at its notifications. Thirty two missed calls.

I imagine Alan sitting there the day before, frantically dialing my number, while his mother turned colder. I think about how angry he had made me for interrupting me and my friends, for making my friends pick fun at me.

I grab my phone and call Emily back. I wonder what she has planned for the weekend. There is nothing I need more right now, than to spend some time with a friend.

“Don’t worry Hayley,” Emily says when she picks up the phone, “you were always nice to the kid.”