

Timothy lay very still, trying to clinch himself into a knot from the eyebrows down. He drew his covers up to his chin and over his lips like a makeshift gag. He didn't want the man in his room to think he was awake. If he lay very still, like a dead person, the man would think he was asleep, and he would go away.

It was hard to keep from crying. He wanted to, but every tiny twitch made him feel like one of the little plastic jigs his dad used when he went fishing. Every time he moved, the man moved. Timothy didn't know how long the man had been there or how close he had gotten to the edge of the bed, but it felt like he'd been awake for a few hours at least. It was so late the crickets had stopped singing, but the birds hadn't started yet.

His back started trembling, and the floor creaked behind him. The man had taken a step. A big one. His shoe touched the leg of the bed. Timothy crammed himself into a tighter ball, barely holding in a whine. A hot tear rolled on his nose, but he couldn't move to blink it away.

The first time he'd heard the man had been two weeks ago. He'd heard the floorboards in his room creaking, and he'd turned over sleepily to see what the noise was. He thought it was his dad, coming in late to check on him. He usually pretended to be asleep when his dad came to check on him at night, but he always loved it when the big guy came to peek in. It was like having a knight or a fireman standing guard outside the door. But that night, he didn't see his father. Instead, a tall, thin man wearing black and white had been standing in the center of the room, holding out one hand toward the bed. Timothy had bolted upright, huddling against the wall behind his bed, but before he could shout for his dad, the thin man was gone.

A week later, Timothy had heard the noises again. He'd rolled over very slowly, trying to make it look like he was still asleep. When he finally managed to force his eyes open, the same thin man was kneeling down beside his bed with one hand on the pillow. His short brown hair hung just tickling his ears, and his long nose tilted to the left at the very end. He smiled, but he looked a little disappointed.

"You've stopped," the man had whispered then. He sounded like the new James Bond in the movies. "I suppose you win again."

Timothy sat paralyzed, unable to even breathe.

The man stood, his long fingers sliding off the pillowcase. They sounded really loud when he did that. "In a week then, Timothy," he said. He turned and faced the door, his head tilted to the side, and took a long step over the creaky part of the floor.

Timothy had instantly huddled into a ball, and he didn't open his eyes until his dad came to wake him for school. He'd slept poorly all week, curled against the wall on the far side of the bed, trying to get to sleep, but trying hard to stay awake too. He didn't say anything to his dad about what he'd seen either. The big guy was tough and smart (and muscled like the old Action Bill toys he used to have), but he'd only say Timothy was having nightmares or making it all up. It's just what parents did. Even when his dad came to check on him at night, creaking the door open as quietly as he could, Timothy pretended to be asleep. He was practicing for when the thin man showed up again. He tried to fool his dad so maybe it would fool the other man too.

Now the week was over, and the floorboards were squeaking again. The thin man was back. Timothy felt himself shaking, but he couldn't stop. He had to go to the bathroom. He wanted to cry. He could feel something, like an old wind blowing out of his mouth from all the way down in his stomach. It sounded like a noise dogs or rabbits make when they're hurt, and he couldn't stop it. It kept getting louder, and it wouldn't stop. He heard joints popping quietly as the thin man knelt down by the bed. He heard the pillowcase rustling, and he knew that long pale fingers were reaching for him. Sliding along his pillow. The rabbit sound kept coming out of his mouth, and he felt even more tears lining up on his nose and falling one by one.

"God, Tim, what's the matter?" his dad said as he jerked the door open across the room. Timothy sat up and cut the sound off. Had it been *that* loud? Had his dad heard it all the way in his room? "Tim, are you okay? Tim?"

His dad flicked the light on, and Timothy could see red through his tight eyelids. Finally, dad was here. He'd do something about the thin man. He'd call the police. He'd beat him up. Some—... Why wasn't he doing it already?

"Timothy, I know you're awake," his dad said in a tired, I'm-getting-angry voice. "Look over here and tell me what's the matter. Are you having another nightmare?"

A nightmare, Timothy thought. That had to be it. The same one, maybe, but now his dad was here to get him back to sleep. Maybe he'd even share his big, waterbed for the night. Timothy relaxed his cramping, wiry muscles and rolled over very slowly to ask.

When he opened his eyes, the thin man was still kneeling right in front of him, holding a long, spindly finger in front of his lips.

"What, Tim?" his dad said, still standing on the opposite side of the room in his pajamas. "It's okay, boy; you're awake now." He took another step into the room, not looking at the thin man at all.

Timothy couldn't breathe. The thin man didn't turn around or say anything. He put one cold, dry hand on Timothy's leg beneath the covers and kept the other finger across his gray-white lips, warning Timothy to remain silent. Timothy's leg jerked at the thin man's touch, and his dad took another step into the room. As tall as he was, the three steps put his dad right next to the thin man at the side of the bed. Neither one looked at the other.

"Dad," Timothy breathed, hardly able to make any noise at all. "Dad, somebody... my leg..."

Each word took a separate breath, and Timothy thought he might suffocate trying to speak. Worse, the thin man had started frowning. The expression made deep black lines on his face. Timothy was moving. He was making noise. The thin man would apparently move only when Timothy did. That's why he'd said that Timothy won last time. The thin man's eyes narrowed, and the lines on his forehead got so deep and dark that they looked drawn on.

"Tim, what is it?" his dad said, kneeling down next to the thin man. "You can tell me. Really. I know your mother

is usually the one who did this before, but I want you to be able to talk to me too. Especially now that we're—"

The thin man's eyes cut to the right, and he started turning his head toward Timothy's dad. Now his dad was moving. Now his dad was making noise.

"Dad, stop," Timothy said suddenly, startling the big guy. "Don't say anything else." The tears were still coming.

"What?" his dad said, sitting back like Timothy had tried to bite him. "Why can't I—"

"Please," Timothy said desperately. "Don't talk any more, Dad. Please."

"Tim, I know this is hard," his dad said, looking puzzled and hurt at the same time, "but it's okay to talk to me. I'm just trying to help you."

The thin man glanced back at Timothy for a second, and then put his free hand (the one in front of his mouth) on the leg of Timothy's dad. The big guy jumped, said one of *those* words and half fell over on the floor.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, getting his hands under him again. "How did you get in my son's room?"

"Hush," the thin man said, still scowling, still keeping a hand on Timothy. "Stand up and keep quiet."

Timothy's dad blinked heavily, as if he might be going back to sleep, and then stood up. He still looked puzzled and a little hurt, but the anger was already gone.

"Your son doesn't love you any more," the thin man said calmly as he stood up too. He put a hand on the shoulder of Timothy's dad and turned him toward the door back into the hallway. They two began to walk toward that door. "You have been a terrible father. You were a worse husband. Why do you think your wife left you?"

"Dad," Timothy called, too shocked to realize he was speaking aloud. "Dad!"

His dad turned back toward the bed briefly, but the thin man kept pulling him along. When the two of them reached the hallway, the thin man pulled the door shut behind them. Right before it closed, Timothy heard the thin

man say, "How can you stand what you've done to your family? How can you live with yourself, Mister Barnes?"

Shocked (or *in shock*), Timothy lay where he was, feeling the heat return to the spot on his leg where the thin man had touched him. Where was his dad? What was the thin man doing to him? Why couldn't he hear anything? Minutes later, the door opened again and Timothy sat up straight.

"Dad?"

"If you wish," the James Bond voice said. "But not tonight. Get dressed and come find me downstairs."

Timothy's jaw locked in the spot right next to his ears. He had to throw up.

"Where's my dad?" he whispered.

"Do as I told you," the thin man said. "Now."

Timothy didn't want to obey. He wanted to run into his dad's room. But even that little defiant part of him was too scared. He didn't want to know what he would see if he did go into his dad's room right now. Instead, he found himself putting on tomorrow's school clothes and tying his shoes. He watched his body doing these things, knowing that he didn't want to do them, but he couldn't stop. He grabbed up his black and green Outdoorsman backpack by rote and moved silently out into the hallway. The thin man motioned to him from the far end by the kitchen door. His dad's room lay at the other end, right next to where he was standing. The door was closed, but he could hear sounds inside even with the door closed. He heard mostly scratching, as if his dad was writing a long letter very quickly.

"Come along, Timothy," the thin man said. "I won't ask you again."

As surely as if the thin man were pulling on the hall carpet, Timothy turned away from his dad's door.

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Kyle Williams leaned back against the chain-link fence and let it hold him like an old hammock as he waited for Laura and Jason to come meet him. He had a story for them and introductions to make. It was what Lionel wanted;

Lionel always got what he wanted. But while he relaxed, wishing he could see stars to count through the night's thick coat of clouds, Kyle leaned there pretending that he'd set this whole thing up. He let himself think he was in control. He relaxed against the sagging, rusted fence, staring up between the squat factory buildings and wondered when the last time was that that had actually been the case.

A sharp bop on the stomach brought him around, and he got back to his feet, making the fence groan in protest. Jason Parks, his old high school buddy and a commensurate asshole, danced out of his reach and pretended to hide behind his younger sister, Laura.

"Catch you sleeping?" Jason said over the girl's shoulder. "Ass."

"How's it been, Kyle?" Laura asked, giving her brother a mostly playful nudge in the ribs. "We haven't seen you around the shop lately. Did you get a new job or something?"

Kyle took a moment to answer. Laura was two years younger than he was and a little puffy around the cheeks, but she was curvy where it counted. She wasn't anything like the girls who hung around Lionel all the time.

"Y-yeah," he said at last. "Something like that."

"Yeah, Kegels here's too good for the honest, hard-working hardware-selling crowd," Jason said, jogging Kyle on the shoulder. Kyle didn't flinch.

"Honest and hard working?" he said instead, leaning stiffly back against the fence. "I wouldn't know. I never met any."

"Hey," Jason said in mock pain, "I earn my five-twenty-five an hour, thank you."

"As long as I do all the heavy lifting," Laura chimed in, leaning against the fence as well, so Kyle stood between her and Jason.

"My own sister, ladies and gentlemen," Jason said, looking up into the sky and holding his arms out.

Laura rolled her eyes, and Kyle held her gaze for a moment when she looked back at him. Her pupils dilated a bit like she didn't know if she should expect a kiss or bad news.

Kyle didn't know either. With their gazes locked, it was certainly nice to let his imagination go. It didn't *have to* be bad news. He'd only invited them out here because—

“So what's so important?” Jason said, thumping Kyle in the center of the back. “What'd you want us to hop a bus and go all the way across town 'right after work' in such a hurry for?”

Laura jumped, looking at her brother, and the moment between she and Kyle crashed like glass. He'd actually been leaning closer to kiss her. From the strained tone in Jason's voice, it was possible he'd figured as much. Kyle rolled back against the fence again, bending it back under his weight. The buttons on his jacket dinged and jangled harshly against the rusty links.

“I've got somebody I want you to meet,” Kyle said, looking out at the sky between the two buildings across the street. “Somebody who wants to meet you.” He looked over at Laura subtly. “I've told him a lot about you.”

“You trying to fix us up or something?” Jason smirked. “I can get my own dates, Kegels.”

“Like you can find 'em,” Laura said quietly. Her flush from the chill in the air deepened just enough to where Kyle could see it in the dim streetlight.

“What?”

“I'm not trying to fix you up, wiseass,” Kyle said. “I want you guys to meet the guy I work for now. I think you'd like him. And I've told him a lot about you. Both of you. Did I say that already?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. He rubbed a hand over his tight, brown crewcut, warming his scalp. “So who is this guy? Sounds like a drug dealer or something.”

“I beg your pardon,” Kyle snapped. Nobody talked that way about Lionel.

“Well, you won't tell us where you work, you're gone three nights a week, you're more tense than I've ever seen you, and you're wearing a new jacket that looks pretty expensive,” Jason said, counting the points off on his fingers. “You selling crack on the side, Kegels? If so, you should come back to the hardware store. Much better market over there in that neighborhood.”

Laura's eyes tried to hide a slightly disappointed look, and Kyle stepped up in Jason's face.

"I'm not into drugs, asshole," he said. "And I hate it when you call me Kegels."

Despite being taller and having many years of teasing experience on his friend, Jason flinched back a step before recovering his standard mien. "Whoa there, Trigger," he said, putting on a smile that didn't quirk up quite as high as it should have. "Just poking at you."

Kyle relaxed slowly and backed down.

"So what's this guy do?" Laura asked, breaking up the knot of tension in the air. "What's his name?"

"It's Lionel," Kyle said, standing in front of Laura and Jason. "He's actually into recording. Music and stuff like that. He goes around some of the clubs in the Great Lakes area scouting local bands. If they're any good, he makes them an offer with a label in New York. He tells me he's going into Detroit for a while to do some scouting there soon. He's a great guy."

"That's a big if," Jason said. "Great guy or not, you've got to be pretty damn generous to give some of the garage bands around here a shot. Especially in New York. Saginaw, Michigan isn't exactly Seattle. Hell, it isn't even on a level with Athens these days."

"Kid Rock's from Michigan," Laura said. "I think KISS is too."

"Yep," Kyle answered.

"KISS?" Jason asked. "I didn't know that."

"That's why this Lionel works for a record company and you lug Dad's nuts at the store."

"Indeed it is, my dear," a clear, loud voice said from just behind Kyle. The three turned, and the tension drained from Kyle's shoulders instantly. Lionel had arrived.

"Guys," Kyle said, holding out a hand to the older man like a game show hostess, "this is Lionel Braughton. He works with—"

"Charmed," Lionel said, stepping past Kyle and extending a hand to Laura smoothly. "You must be Laura Parks." He kissed the hand she offered and looked into her eyes.

Laura froze. She'd never seen a man so handsome. His hair was thick but not overlong, waving in the light breeze in a way that wasn't quite messed up but still wasn't annoyingly immaculate. His skin was flawless, and his dark blue eyes sparkled with some hidden amusement. His kiss even felt strong through the light fabric of her gloves.

"Jason's sister," Kyle said. "This is Jason here."

Lionel looked over his shoulder at Kyle a moment, grinning thinly at Kyle's reaction. He extended a pale hand toward Jason.

"Nice to meet you, Jason," Lionel said, taking Jason's hand firmly in his. Dressed in slacks, expensive shoes, a finely tailored wool greatcoat and a silk scarf, Lionel stood in perfect contrast to tall, lanky Jason who always seemed to buy clothes just one season out of style.

"Yeah," Jason said. He stood with his arm completely extended, keeping one foot back, like he was trying to keep Lionel as far away as possible. Kyle remembered feeling that way himself when he'd first met the man. He didn't remember what it had actually felt like, but he remembered the sensation academically.

"So has Kyle let you both in on the plan for the evening?" Lionel said, turning back to look down into Laura's eyes. Laura's breath quickened a bit, and Kyle felt the same knot in his stomach that he'd been feeling all night. He'd been afraid Lionel would pick Laura over Jason.

"Nah, what's that?" Jason said, taking a step closer to Kyle, so the two of them were facing Lionel's back together. He stood up a little straighter, given confidence by being closer to his friend than the stranger. "Kyle just said you wanted to meet us."

Lionel turned halfway back around at that, keeping most of his body toward Laura. "Just one of you," he said. "Why don't you go home, Jason? I'm taking Kyle and your sister with me to some of the local music clubs. I'll bet it doesn't sound like much fun. That and I can only get two extra people in under my company's expenses."

"It doesn't sound like much fun at all, really," Jason said thickly. "Especially if I have to pay my own way."

"I could spot you," Kyle said, gripping Jason's arm sharply just above the elbow. Jason winced and looked at Kyle. "At least for a few places."

Lionel coughed quietly, and Kyle darted a look at him. The faint line between the man's eyebrows had started to tighten up a bit — a sign that Lionel was displeased. Kyle let go of Jason's arm.

"Go ahead and catch a bus, Jason," Lionel purred. "I'll have Kyle and your sister back at a reasonable hour, or my name's not Lionel Braughton."

"Sure," Jason said, sticking his hands in his pockets and shrugging. "I'll catch you guys later."

"Bye, Jason," Laura said softly behind Lionel.

It seemed so obvious to Kyle when Lionel was manipulating people, that he wondered how the people in question didn't notice it. Were they just blind? He wanted to grab Jason by the back of his windbreaker and say, "Are you really going to leave your sister alone with a total stranger?" but he couldn't. Lionel wouldn't have been very happy with him if he did that. It was one thing to disagree with Lionel, he'd learned; it was something entirely different to show it in front of people Lionel had just met.

"Yeah, take care, guys," Jason said again as he walked away. "Keep an eye on Laura. No dings or scratches, and fill her tank before you bring her back."

"Very funny," Laura said distractedly. She hadn't taken her eyes off Lionel since he'd arrived.

In a few steps, Jason was out of sight around a corner, and Lionel offered Laura his elbow. Laura put her hand through the space and leaned in closer than Kyle thought she should.

"Come along, Kyle," Lionel said. "Keep your eyes open."

Kyle followed obediently along behind Lionel and Laura in the opposite direction from which Jason had left. Laura hung from Lionel's arm like a horny tramp in a movie, and Kyle jammed his hands into his jacket's pockets. Why did Lionel have to pick her? Laura was bigger than the girls Lionel usually liked. He never really seemed to like any-

body but skinny girls. Jason was skinnier than Laura, and Jason was an asshole. Why didn't Lionel pick him? He could obviously tell how much Kyle liked Laura and *didn't* like Jason; it was as if Lionel was doing it on purpose.

“—just around this corner and through this pass,” Lionel was saying to Laura ahead. He stopped at the mouth of a narrow alley and turned to Kyle. “Isn't it this way?”

Kyle blinked, almost forgetting his part — the routine he and Lionel had gone over time and again. “I think it's *this* way,” he said woodenly, pointing along the sidewalk a way farther. The stench of garbage and waste drifted up from the alley, but it was empty of vagrants.

“Hmm...” Lionel said, sounding genuinely confused, just as he always did. “I don't think so. Laura?”

“Whichever,” Laura said, staring breathlessly into Lionel's eyes.

She's more of a sucker than her brother, Kyle thought.

“Good,” Lionel said. He tipped Laura a wink casually and said, “We'll try this way. You can go ahead around the other side of the building if you want, Kyle.”

“It's this way, I tell you,” Kyle said, barely making the line believable. He walked away from the alley and waited for the sound of Lionel and Laura's footsteps to enter the alley. When they had moved off, he came back to the corner and leaned against it trying to look casual. He scanned the sidewalk up and down on both sides of the street, but nobody was out in this part of town after dark. Lionel could get on with his business in peace. Kyle kept his eyes open.

Not long after, Kyle heard Lionel's footsteps scuttle to the side of the alley and a sound like the two strollers thumping against the wall. Kyle waited for the shocked scream — there was usually one at this point, even if it was short — but Laura didn't scream. In fact, he heard what sounded like mumbled laughter. Both Lionel's *and* Laura's. It sounded like they were making out in there. That was a new one. A kiss, a nibble on the ear, a caress on the neck...

Kyle shook his head and balled his fists. This was Laura he was talking about. He'd known her since junior high. She

had better judgment than to kiss some guy she'd just met. Except that that guy was Lionel, and the two of them were both more interested in each other than either one was in Kyle. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears, and he crushed his hands into even tighter knots in his pockets. Someone could have walked up right then, and he didn't know if he would even give the warning signal or not.

At the next set of sounds, Kyle almost turned around, despite all of Lionel's warnings not to do so unless it was really important. Laura sounded like she was moaning. Not in fear — he'd heard others make that sound, and this wasn't it. She sounded like she was enjoying herself. And she wasn't moaning in one long breath either; it was rhythmic... animal. What the hell was Lionel doing in there? He wasn't supposed to even be able to do anything like *that*. Kyle edged closer to the mouth of the alley.

The sounds within got louder and faster quickly, and Kyle ripped the seam of one of his jacket pockets. Lionel wouldn't do this to him; he'd told the man how he felt for Laura. Lionel was nicer to him and treated him better than anybody else, but how could he be doing what it sounded like he was doing? He never did this with any of the others. He just took what he needed and left them alone. But Laura was only a virgin — an 18-year-old one on top of that. And they'd just met. Lionel couldn't do this. Not with somebody Kyle felt this way about.

Without thinking about it, Kyle slammed his fist into the bricks behind him and clenched his eyes shut. It wasn't fair.

At the sound, the noises in the alley stopped, and a thick dribble of plaster and dust drifted down from the shallow crater his hand had made in the wall. Kyle rubbed his uninjured hand and looked around to see if anyone had noticed the noise. When he completed his scan, Lionel stood beside him. Kyle hadn't even heard him approach.

"What's the trouble?" the man said quietly, his eyes darting from shadow to dark doorway to boarded window. "Did you hear something?"

Lionel's eyes were wide and his mouth hung open just slightly. His nostrils flared, and his skin looked more flushed than usual. His expression was one of an excited man who should be breathing very fast, except that no white puffs floated away into the chill air. After a moment, his excitement faded as well. Only the ruddy flush remained.

"I didn't hear anything," Kyle said, trying to shrink into the coat Lionel had bought for him and disappear. He couldn't believe he'd disturbed Lionel. "I'm sorry. I—"

Lionel glared for a second, his pupils focusing down to laser points, and then laughed out loud. The abrupt change jarred Kyle, and he looked around nervously. Nobody responded to that sound either.

"It happens, boy," the man said, wiping a drying fleck away from his lips with a manicured nail. "Once. It doesn't happen twice though. Understand?"

"Yessir," Kyle said, nodding rapidly.

"Good. Now go on in there and look after your girl," Lionel said, nodding into the alley with liquid mirth in his cold eyes. "She should still be ready."

"What?"

"For tonight's lesson," Lionel said, gesturing offhandedly. "The big dog eats first. Then the little dog gets what's left. That's the lesson."

"What do—" Kyle stammered. "I can't— I'm not—"

"Not like me, boy," Lionel said, rolling his eyes impatiently. "We've got different hungers, you and I. I filled mine; you go fill yours." With a curt shove, he propelled Kyle on down the alley a short distance.

Without a word, Kyle walked the last few steps and found Laura sitting against one wall of the alley. She smiled lazily at the sound of footsteps, but she didn't open her eyes. Her blonde hair was mussed and the first few buttons of her blouse were open beneath her jacket, but she looked otherwise unharmed. Kyle squatted next to her and tilted her chin to the left; Lionel liked the right side of the neck. Aside from a few dark spots, however, he didn't see any marks. Only the smooth curve of her neck. Kyle leaned in a little closer, convincing

himself that he only wanted a closer look. When he still saw no marks, he glanced back down the alley. Lionel stood around the corner, only the edge of his coat visible from this angle. Kyle had Laura all to himself.

Glancing around nervously, he lifted the edge of her shirt, popping the last few buttons with a snap of his fingers. Laura shifted a bit, brushing against his shaking finger. He couldn't believe he was doing this, but he couldn't believe that he'd never thought of it either. Working for Lionel had made him a lot stronger, but he felt emotions much more strongly as well. Especially around Laura. She acted like she felt the same way about him most of the time too.

Except tonight when she'd met Lionel, of course.

"Laura, wake up," he said, easing her onto her back on a small bed of discarded newspapers. He put her arms over her head and cradled both of her wrists with one hand. "Laura."

Laura stirred a bit more and her eyes fluttered half open. She tried to focus and smiled sleepily up at him. "Lionel?" she mumbled breathlessly. "That was great. What did you do to me?"

Kyle felt his jaw clench into a hard line, and he tightened his grip around Laura's wrists. Here he was trying to be gentle, to show her that he wasn't going to abuse her like Lionel had, and she actually had to gale to *like* it? She liked being taken advantage of?

"Ow, Lionel," Laura moaned, growing a bit more coherent. "My hands."

Kyle closed his hand a little tighter and put his face right in front of Laura's. "I don't care," he said through clenched teeth, white wisps of breath huffing into her face like steam from a furnace. "I'm not Lionel."

Laura's eyes opened wide momentarily, and Kyle pressed his mouth roughly over hers to stifle any further sound. When she tried to move, he forced her legs apart with his knees and started to move his free hand.

Somewhere behind him, he heard footsteps and quiet laughter moving toward him down the alley. It was Lionel's voice, so he didn't stop what he was doing. Lionel would watch him for a change. The big dog had already eaten; it

was the little dog's turn now. Frankly, Kyle didn't much care as long as Lionel didn't try to stop him.

Which Lionel didn't.

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Father George Stinson slid the confessional's wooden partition aside and regarded the silhouette cast on the thin lattice screen. He didn't usually take confession so late at night, but he'd just received an urgent phone call begging his assistance.

"Help me, Father," the person in the adjoining booth said after a moment's hesitation. "I have sinned."

Father Stinson didn't recognize the voice any better now that he heard it in person, but he could place the accent a little more easily. It had the back-of-the-mouth, nasal quality particular to Boston. The man sounded a little like a Kennedy.

"How long has it been since your last confession?" he asked, trying to keep a long yawn out of his voice.

"About two weeks," the man said. "I was here then for the same sin, Father."

"Are you one of my parishioners?" Stinson asked in undisguised suspicion. He knew this person wasn't actually one of the Kennedy's, but he would have remembered someone who sounded so much like one of them.

"You're not supposed to ask, Father," the man said politely.

Father Stinson rubbed his eyes. "I apologize, my son. The hour steals my tact. I don't recognize your voice."

"It's all right, Father," the voice said with a hint of wry amusement. He leaned closer to the screen, tightening his silhouette down. "You never do."

After a pause, Stinson decided to leave that cryptic statement be. "What did you need to speak to me about, my son?"

"I came here," the man said, "because I've done it again. And you're the only one who makes me feel better."

"Go on."

Neither man said anything for a moment.

"What did you do, again?" Stinson said a bit gruffly.

"You don't—" the man began angrily. "No, of course. Forgive me again. I'm an idiot."

"You're no idiot, son," Stinson said. "Take it slowly. And from the beginning. Take as much time as you need."

The man in the other side of the booth put a hand against the screen and leaned his head on it, bowing the thin lattice toward the priest.

"I couldn't control myself again, Father," he sighed disappointedly. "I couldn't stop myself."

"Couldn't stop yourself from doing what?" Stinson asked, leaning forward. "What did you do?"

"Remember, this doesn't leave this booth," the man said, still leaning on the lattice.

"The act of Confession is sacred, my son," Stinson assured him. "Not even the courts can touch it. Go on."

The confessor snorted derisively at the mention of the legal system, but he still sounded relieved.

"It's supposed to be so easy for us, Father," he said several moments later. "But I just can't do it."

"Yes..."

"The ones we take are supposed to like what we do to them, right?"

Father Stinson knew what the man was driving at, but he wanted to hear the man say so aloud. It would make his actual confession easier.

"What do you mean?" he said, leaning forward even more. "What are you referring to?"

"You *know*, Father," the man replied, irritated. "Well, maybe not, but I don't have to say it for you to get the picture."

The man sat back against the back of the booth, removing his silhouette from the screen.

"Tell me everything, my son," Stinson urged.

"Yeah, all right," the man said, sighing again. "Sorry. Yeah, anyhow, regardless of what I just said, people don't like it when I..."

"When you do what, son?"

"When I do what I have to do," the man said haltingly. "You know."

"I think I understand," Stinson said. He had moved so that his face hovered only a few inches from the screen.

"Yeah," the man said. "Well, I don't know if I'm not doing something right, or what, because people can't really handle it when I do it."

"What do you mean?" Stinson asked. His voice seemed a little thick to him, so he crossed himself and promised to say a few quick Hail Marys once this visitor had left.

"They squirm," the man said, his voice shaking. "None of them hold still. They don't even close their eyes. Some of them even scream and try to push me away. One got a fingernail in my eye once; I couldn't see right for a week."

"I see," Stinson said, growing uncomfortable but unwilling to cut the confession short.

"The others all say it's so easy, Father, but it isn't. They say their people like it. Their people get really still, even try to pull them in tighter. I've watched them sometimes, and they're not doing anything different than I do. Why do I have such a hard time?"

"You said it happened again?" Father Stinson said after the speaker's pause dragged out. It was all he could think of.

"Yeah," the man said, gaining a second wind. "I tried it again last night. It'd been so long since the last time that I couldn't wait any more. I felt like I was going to go crazy. I wait longer every time, but it gets worse the longer I wait."

"I understand. Of all people, I do."

"You don't understand shit, Father," the man snapped. He cursed again, this time to himself, and said, "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Go on, son," Stinson said. "It's all right."

"Yeah well, it happened again last night, like I said. I was walking trying to clear my head when I saw this whore out in front of this book shop near where I live. I live out in Lansing. We have a lot of whores there for some reason. At least downtown. I don't even know why. I guess it's because there's nothing else to do out there."

"Perhaps, son," Stinson said. He couldn't help but wonder why this man had driven all the way into Iron Rapids if he had committed his sin in a different city.

"So I saw her, and I walked up before I even knew what I was thinking. I walked up right behind her and put my nose in the curly hair she had combed over her neck. I sniffed her like a dog, I was buzzing so hard."

"You were intoxicated?"

"No man, just *buzzing*. Hungry, you know? I couldn't remember the last time I'd been out. I think it was two weeks, but I'm not sure. Definitely more than one."

"I see. So what happened?" Stinson noticed with some shame that his breath had quickened. He added a few Our Fathers to the Hail Marys he already had coming.

"Well, I put a hand on her shoulder, and she whipped around all fast, 'cause I'd startled her. I thought she was going to hit me at first, or pepper-gas me or something. Luckily it was dark, and she couldn't see my expression too well."

"I would think someone like—"

"So without letting go of her, I gave her some fake name and told her to come with me. She nodded okay, like they always do — like whores — but really, I don't know how I even got two coherent sentences out. I was hurting so bad. I just stuffed a wad of bills in her hand from out of my pocket — didn't even count 'em — and pulled her through this alley to a set-back doorway on a back street."

"I see," Stinson said. His breathing had increased to match the pace of the speaker's words, but neither one of them noticed. "What happened, Elliot?"

"The same thing that always happens, Father," the speaker said, slapping the inside of the booth with a sharp *bang*. "I started to take her, but she didn't hold still. First, she started trying to nudge my mouth away with her chin, and then she started trying to scrunch her neck up so I couldn't get at it. Then she started trying to push me away with her hands. She was wearing this plastic red jacket, so I held on to that and pushed her against the wall of the re-

cess we were in. She even started trying to kick me in the back of the knee with one of her high heels.

“When she did that, her other heel broke, and both of us ended up half in, half out of the little doorway. I landed on top of her. After that, she lay there for a second with her eyes really wide open.”

A long pause ticked by until Father Stinson said, “Then what?”

“Well,” the man said, gathering steam again, “I grabbed her up by the coat and took her over back into the darkness again, first of all. When I did, she made this little bat-shriek noise and started taking these short breaths. Her skin was getting gray too; I think she hit the edge of one of the steps when we fell. And her knees kept wobbling. She couldn’t stand up. She did something to her back.”

Stinson knew where this was going, but the man had to say it in his own words. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a real confession. “So what did you do?”

“What do you think I did?” the man snapped. “It’d been a week — maybe two. I couldn’t wait any longer. I had to have it *right then and right there*. I just held her there up against the wall and took her. Even then, the bitch kept trying to fight me. She tried to hit me. She pulled out some of my hair. She kept whining and moaning as if somebody was killing her. She wouldn’t shut up, so finally, I just rammed my crotch into hers so hard that it slammed her back up against the concrete. She passed out after that.”

“And you...”

“I didn’t stop, if that’s what you’re asking, Father,” the man said. He sounded amused at that part. “Not until I was done and the buzzing went away.”

“What happened to the girl?” Stinson asked. He noticed that his hand was shaking, and he clamped it around his rosary.

“I left her,” the man said, his voice turning suddenly unsteady. “I left her there in the doorway still holding all that money. Her eyes were open, but they’d rolled back. She was still muttering something, but I didn’t stay around to listen.” The excitement started washing away, and the man put his hand against his side of the screen. “I took off

and I hid. Then tonight, I called you. I had to talk to you, Father. You're the only one who helps me with this."

Stinson ignored that last and said, "What *exactly* did you want to tell me, son?"

"When I was standing there, right before I ran away, I realized something," the man said. His voice rasped, drained of all emotion. "I realized I was blaming the girl for what was going wrong with me. And I blame the others for telling me how easy this is supposed to be. For lying about it."

"What else, son?"

"Well, mainly, I felt — feel — envious of them. This comes so easily to them, but I can't do it right. I've never been able to. Worst, I feel like it's everybody else's problem but mine." The man paused for a long time. "It's like I can't believe that *I* could possibly have problems. It's got to be someone else's fault. It can't have anything to do with me."

"Go on."

"Sorry, Father," the man said at last. "It's hard to admit the sin of pride sometimes, even when it's right there in your face. But it makes me angry, and when my anger gets the best of me, I can't even think. Let alone confess properly."

"Pride?" Stinson asked.

The dent in the lattice screen vanished again, and the man said, "Of course. That's what I always confess about when I come here. That and envy."

Stinson's mouth worked, searching for words.

"What did you think I was here for?" the man asked. "Cause you're such a fucking great conversationalist?"

"Calm down, son," Father Stinson said shakily. "Let's just keep talking."

"Keep talking?" the man said, his voice taking on a tone that made Father Stinson cringe unconsciously. "What else do we have to talk about? What fucking else? This is where you forgive me, damn it!"

"I don't understand your anger, son," Stinson said, shrinking back against the far wall of the booth. The man's voice no longer sounded entirely cultured and Bostonian.

The Father heard a distinctly deeper and feral tone overlapping the original sound.

“You said my fucking name,” the man said, standing up in the booth and leaning against the adjoining wall. “I thought I’d made you forget, but you said my fucking name. You telling me you don’t remember the rest? The rest is the good stuff, remember!? I know how much you like to hear the good stuff.”

Stinson tried to shrink farther away from the enraged voice, but something the insane man was shouting caught his attention. He’d called the man Elliot. How did he know that name? He’d never heard the voice (or such a story) before. The name had just come out of his mouth unbidden.

“Is that what you’re saying?” the voice bellowed. The man slammed his hands against the adjoining wall twice, hard enough to shake the entire confessional booth. “Answer me!”

“I— I thought you’d come here to confess about your sexual dysfunction,” Stinson stammered. “About your deviant behavior...”

“My *what!*?”

Stinson froze, and the man in the booth hit the wall again. The lattice screen jiggled loose of its frame and slid halfway down before catching a corner. Stinson thought for a second that the man would knock the screen the rest of the way out and reach through the window for him. He stared at the triangle-shaped gap at the top of the window, transfixed like a bird before a snake. He couldn’t even lift his hands to try to close the flimsy wooden partition.

With a jerk, the man in the confessional moved, and Stinson could see his eyes clearly above the displaced screen. They were a dark green, shot through with bright veins of red, and they strained open, showing white all the way around the outside. Stinson crossed himself without even thinking about it. The eyes bulged, burning with an intensity Stinson had never seen or felt in all his life. But some incongruity about the eyes plagued him. It took the priest a moment to realize that the eyes weren’t moving up and down at all. People this excited usually breathed faster or panted, and that made their eyes bob in rhythm. This man’s eyes weren’t doing that.

“Look here, Father,” the man said, pulling the screen down from where it hung. “I’m sorry. Now listen to me.”

The man’s face was clean-shaven and small, but still attractive. His hair was slicked back in a pony tail, which made his ears stick out. His lips were thin; his medium-sized nose was straight. Except for his eyes. Those didn’t change, even when his voice calmed back down.

“Listen carefully, Father Stinson,” the man said, leaning into the booth with him. “Don’t say anything. I was wrong to come here so soon after the last time. It just brings it all back up when I do that. I shouldn’t do that to you. Just forget about this, okay? Forget I called you. Forget I came by.”

“I can’t do that, my son,” Stinson said, still cowering. His voice cracked over the last words. “You n-need help. I can talk to counselors, psychologists. I’ll see who—”

“I said forget it, Father,” the man said, leaning farther into booth. His head loomed only a foot away from Stinson’s face. His eyes still glowed deep green, although the angry red lines were beginning to fade. “I was being an idiot. You can’t help me. This isn’t really your problem anyway. You need to go back to bed and forget that any of this happened, from the time I first called you tonight. You understand?”

“Yes,” Stinson said, slumping against the side of the booth like an empty bag. His eyes closed heavily, just as the man leaned back and started trying to right the lattice screen.