

Ashleigh knew it was him. His gruff, slurring baritone voice. His fat fist against the door. He'd be waking the neighbors, and they'd be calling the cops. She was still too weak from her trip to the emergency room three days ago, and didn't have the strength to deal with this. She stayed with Jeremy because it was easier than staying with Leonard Huff. Safer.

Jeremy had offered Ashleigh a ride home from work seven months ago, and she had told him she didn't want to go back to her father's house. He suggested they go to his apartment and get high instead, and she agreed. It wasn't long before Ashleigh was spending the night at Jeremy's Southside apartment. The choice between a sweet guy who provided a good high, and a raving, nasty, controlling drunk, was an easy one.

She didn't even call him 'Dad' anymore, but 'Leonard.' His all-nighters and recently, his affiliation with a group of bikers, was a pain in the ass; and although she had vivid memories of his hands on her when she was a little girl, he had stopped pursuing her for his need to touch innocence.

This didn't stop his biker-buddies from crossing the line, though. At a nubile eighteen, she was now a young woman, and considered ripe for the picking. When one of the leather-clad animals came by the house and put his hands on her tits, she packed her stuff and went to Jeremy's. That's when she decided that Jeremy had his flaws, but at least he wasn't violent. He'd never hit her, even when she'd smoked the last of their weed. If she kept him smoking, she could

pretty much do what she wanted. He didn't make much money as a night shift stocker at Handy's Grocery, but she didn't make much as a cashier there, either. She didn't really do without anything, and the rent was only \$350 a month. A few days ago, Jeremy got extra pot from his dealer so they could make a little cash, because Ashleigh needed time off to recuperate from her fall down the stairs.

With the pounding outside growing louder, she snatched the door open and Leonard Huff barreled in, headed straight for Jeremy, who was finishing the removal of marijuana seeds from the marred glass coffee table, sweeping them onto a metal serving tray and shoving it under the ratty Goodwill sofa.

She put herself between the two men, hoping to prevent anything that might have cops snooping around. The last thing she needed was to go to jail for possession.

Leonard Huff pushed her out of the way, and she fell into the glass top of the coffee table.

2

Roy peered in the window, and saw the boy hovering near the kitchen, saw the girl sitting on the chair with blood on her arm. With one last glance at the street, hoping to see the police cruiser, he knocked on the door. "EMS!" he called.

Jeremy opened the door, and Roy stepped in first, carrying his jump bag fully stocked with an intubation roll, already assessing the damage to Jeremy's face. Amy came along behind him, trying not to look at Jeremy; all she could see now was him beating off to kiddie porn.

Ashleigh was sitting on the chair across from Huff, still in a robe and on medication from her recent trip to the hospital. Now, she had one hand pressed to her bleeding elbow. Amy knew the girl would need sutures. Ashleigh looked up at her with a mixture of embarrassment and relief. Embarrassment, that the nice female paramedic she had poured her heart out to was coming to the rescue again; and relief, that somehow everything would be taken care of and some semblance of normalcy would return.

Even before the staircase fall at the apartment a few days ago, Amy and Roy had been to the Huff house to patch up Mrs. Huff when Leonard

directed his anger at her. Police had escorted her to the Battered Women's Shelter that night, and it was unclear whether or not she was still residing there.

Perhaps it was why Leonard Huff was at the apartment now. His anger needed a target, and he couldn't get to his wife. He had pounded his beefy fist into the young man's face and made a real mess of the living room of their tiny apartment. He was at the end of a nasty binge, having burned up the fuel of whiskey, and was sitting on the sofa nearing a nap. Amy stepped over the fallen ashtray and remnants of potato chips dotting the floor, and sent up a prayer that he would not find any reserve tank in his body before they got the job done, or at least not until the cops arrived to stand sentry.

The ashtray, along with two smoldering cigarettes, lay on the dirt-colored carpet, amid shards of glass. Amy picked them up and tossed them in the tray to be safe.

Roy saw that Jeremy was lucky not to have a broken nose. He might get away with some butterfly bandages on the cut above his eye, but the rest of his injuries were the usual contusions when a fist contacts the skin. He had the young man sit at the kitchen table while he set to work on him.

As the two medics donned surgical gloves to cleanse wounds and apply compresses, Huff muttered expletives and warned Jeremy that he was not even close to being finished with him. "She'll never be clean again," he said. "You made her dirty."

"You're not worried about me, Leonard," Ashleigh hissed. "Look what you did to my arm!" She held up the lacerated elbow, causing Amy to drop the gauze roll and forcing her to gather it and start winding it around again.

Huff lit a cigarette awkwardly and let it dangle precariously from his inebriated lips. "You brought that on yourself, little girl," he said around the cigarette. "You need to learn when to stay the hell outa the way."

Jeremy leaned away from Roy's cotton swab and snarled at Huff, "You're fuckin' going to jail."

"Oh yeah? What for?"

"Assault and battery. You're a sorry-ass excuse for a father. It's a good thing Ashleigh met me."

"Wors' thing ever happened to her." The glowing ash fell off Huff's cigarette and landed on his blue shirt, stained with sweat and booze. A wet spot doused the cherry, making a sizzling sound. Amy was afraid he would burst into flames.

"You're goin' to jail, you sorry piece a shit!"

"Be still—" Roy reprimanded, pressing the last butterfly bandage on the boy's head, anxious for he and Amy to get out of there.

"You're goin' to jail," Jeremy repeated.

Amy wanted to scream, *You belong in jail, too, you sick pedophile!* She knew she'd have to bite her tongue until they finished the call. This situation had become too personalized to her, now that Ashleigh had spilled her guts. She didn't want that kind of investment in her patients. It was hard enough without that.

Huff tried to push himself up, but rocked back, and had to scoot to the edge of the sofa before he could manage to stand. "I ain't goin' to jail if I ain't here when the cops get here—"

"Sit down," Roy ordered him in his best authoritative tone.

Huff paused, considering him, then staggered over. Roy got up to prepare for evasive action, when Huff took the cigarette from his mouth and threw it at Roy.

Roy held up a warning finger. "Now you just behave yourself. You've caused enough trouble."

"You ain't seen trouble yet, boy." Huff lurched forward and pushed Roy aside, reaching for Jeremy, who bear-crawled away, scattering the top-most contents of Roy's jump bag. Angry that the young man had scampered out of reach, Huff grabbed Roy again.

Amy tapped on the big man's shoulder, and he turned around unsteadily. "Could you do me a favor, sir?"

Frowning, he swayed slightly. "What?"

"Your hand looks terrible. Could you go over to the sofa and sit down so I can take a look at it? It looks like it hurts."

Still holding Roy's shirt at the shoulder, he looked at his free right hand. His knuckles were red. "Yeah. My hand needs some nursin'." He released Roy and went to the sofa, sitting and holding his hand out to her.

Roy blinked rapidly like some cartoon character, and Amy tried not to smile. There was little she could do for the sore knuckles, but she made a production of wrapping gauze around

them, hoping to stall long enough for their cop friends to arrive.

Roy kept a close eye on Huff as he gathered the items that had been knocked out of his bag.

Finally, the police arrived. Sergeant Kenneth Branch and his Rookie, Jimmy Tackett assessed the situation quickly. They were also familiar with this family and their various degrees of in-fighting.

A glint of morning sunlight reflected off Branch's bald head. Before taking a razor to his hair after losing a bet, Kenneth Branch never fully appreciated the creative genius of eyebrows. They were crucial to keeping sweat out of the eyes, and in his line of work, vision was sometimes the only thing between you and a bullet. He even fancied the idea of God as a bald entity. A tall, muscular man with thick arms and legs, Branch was intimidating; a comfort to have around if you needed help, and a frightening presence if you were in trouble with the law.

Tackett was short and boyish-looking, and ripe for a bullet from some street thug. Tackett's best chance for survival was to be partnered with Branch. The contrast of the two was almost comical. Like Batman and Robin. Not much older than Jeremy, Tackett was the mirror image of the young man cowering in the kitchen, with slight alterations based on the application of free will. Two young men who took different paths. It only takes one wrong turn to create that kind of polarity.

"What can we do to help out, here, folks?" Branch asked.

Huff was suddenly aware of where the new voice came from, and got up, knocking Amy back to her rump on the floor. He gestured angrily, the end of the gauze around his knuckles dangling in the air. "Don't nobody touch me, goddammit." He gestured at Ashleigh. "Come on over here, girl. I'm taking you home."

"Now hang on—don't I know you? What's your name, sir?"

The big man turned around, his comb-over flailing upright. "Name's Huff. I come to take my little girl home!"

"I'm not goin' anywhere with you!" Ashleigh shouted.

Jeremy moved over to Ashleigh in a show of support, and she moved away, almost imperceptibly.

Branch met Ashleigh's eyes. "Is he here with your permission?"

"Well I didn't know he was gonna try to kill Jeremy!"

To Jeremy: "Do you intend to press charges?"

"Hell yes."

Tackett asked Ashleigh for her ID. He turned to Branch. "She's eighteen."

Branch held up both his hands to Huff. "Now, Mr. Huff, your daughter is at the age of consent, so you can't force her to—"

"I don' care what consent she is, she's comin' home!"

The sergeant swiveled his right hip so that his firearm was out of the man's reach, and planted his feet as if he was about to perform a Jackie Chan movement. "Mr. Huff, let's do this the easy

way, okay? Please turn around and put your hands behind your back."

He shook his head. "Nope. I ain't goin'."

"Sir, I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. Turn around and—"

Huff swung an arm at Branch, but he leaned back and the blow missed. Branch snatched the wrist and twisted it behind Huff's back as he spun him, pushing him toward the sofa. Tackett was beside his partner and in a few swift seconds, they had his face in the cushions, and were handcuffing him.

Officer Branch had just celebrated 10 years on the force; nine of them in New York, and had transferred to the Burlington P.D. to hedge his bets. He considered himself lucky: lucky to have lived. That luck was now bolstered by the low rate of violent crime in Vermont. Still, Branch was looking forward to his training as a Detective. He intended to spend the last ten years on the force wearing his own clothes, and sitting at a desk rather than in a squad car.

"Am I under arrest?" Huff bellowed into the smelly foam.

"Yes you are, sir. Drunk and disorderly, assault and battery, attempted assault of a police officer, for now. You have the right to remain silent—"

"I ain't gonna be silent!" he shouted.

Branch continued to Mirandize him as he and Tackett half-dragged, half-led him to the door, the drunk man's flailings managing to knock Amy off balance and onto her rump again.

As Tackett returned with the forms for Jeremy and Ashleigh to fill out, Roy pulled off his surgical gloves and tossed them in a Ziploc bag for later disposal. Moving over to Amy, he looked down at his partner, who was still seated on the floor. He plucked a jerky strip from a pen protector in his breast pocket and popped the end in his mouth. "No sitting down on the job, Spenser," he cracked.