Shelter From the Cold

by Daddycums

Mf, inc, 1st

The icy chill of the cold, November evening that marked the first snowfall of the year could not even compare to the chill in John Burke's heart. As he walked the four blocks from the corner store to his apartment with a gallon of milk in his hand, he stared down at the ground, lest he catch the eye of one of the few people who ventured out on a night like this in the otherwise silent and deserted streets. He didn't want to talk to them. He didn't even want to acknowledge their existence. Fortunately, most people had shut themselves up inside their warm homes, cut off and protected from the elements. Nobody wanted to be out in this weather.

Nobody but John Burke. He preferred it like this. It wasn't that he enjoyed the cold; on the contrary, he had himself bundled up against the chill of the autumn night like any sane person. But the weather kept the crowds at bay, leaving him alone. He detested crowds, the sounds of people talking or children laughing, the sounds of life that reminded him that his was not yet over.

Agoraphobia, some might call it. An unreasonable fear of being in public. Others might call it misanthropy. John simply called it, "hatred of the human race."

Why he didn't just commit suicide and end the nightmare, he didn't know. It had been ten years, after all, since his life had essentially come to an end. Now he had nothing left, no reason to go on living any more. But still he continued, day in and day out, hating life but fearing death.

He had managed to procure a job working from home, which was the only thing keeping him sane. It didn't pay well, but at least he didn't have to spend much time around other people. Sometimes he went weeks without speaking to another human being. He didn't know his neighbors, even the ones in the same apartment building. He was a recluse, a hermit. A thousand years ago he might have wandered out into the country away from civilization, to live his life in solitude and simplicity. But there were no longer any places left where civilization didn't encroach, so he had to do the best with what he had.

He spotted a gray sedan driving down the street, not unlike the car he used to own, the car that had played a central point in many of his nightmares over the past ten years. Those horrible dreams had diminished in frequency and intensity lately, for which he was grateful, but it only took the sight of a similar vehicle to bring it all back to the forefront of his memory.

It had been summer then, a bright and cool morning full of hope and promise. He had considered himself the happiest man in the world. With a good job, a modest house, and most importantly a loving family, his future looked bright. Nothing could ruin things for him. Or so he thought.

It was supposed to be a simple trip to the park with his young wife and three-year-old girl Mary. He could remember it so vividly. How many times had he replayed those events over and over in his mind, wondering if he could have done something, anything, to change things? If he could just take it all back, if he could just do it all over again, things would turn out differently. He would still be happy.

But he had made a simple mistake that had ruined everything. He had turned on the car and placed Mary in her car seat, then headed back inside for a moment to gather the picnic basket and blanket. His wife was in the bathroom doing some last-minute finishing touches to her makeup before joining them. John had meant to be inside for only a moment, but then the phone rang. Some annoying telemarketer who wouldn't take no for an answer. The call lasted two minutes.

Two minutes. Plenty of time for a carjacker to sneak into the driveway and snatch an unlocked vehicle with the motor running.

He tried unsuccessfully to put that memory out of his mind. *Mary!* he thought. *Where are you now? Are you happy, wherever you are? Have you found a family that loves you as much as I did? Are you even still alive?*

He stared around at the cold, faceless buildings, finding a certain solace in his isolation. For months after the incident he had wondered who the carjacker was. He saw that man in every face; every human being was part of the same species as the man who had taken his daughter away from him. That a person was capable of committing such a horrible act had destroyed all faith he had in his fellow man. In every heart lay the potential to become that same fiend, that devil who would kidnap a child and ruin her father's life.

So he had withdrawn from society, hiding within himself and abhorring all contact with the outside world. His wife, to her credit, had stuck by him for three whole years. Somehow she had managed to put the incident behind her, and she had encouraged him to do the same. But he couldn't. So finally, she had asked for a divorce, and he had agreed immediately. Last he heard, she had remarried and was living happily with a man who could give her what John could not. He carried no grudge; only the tiniest regret for what might have been.

Just then, he felt someone move up beside him and take his arm. He glanced down in surprise and saw a girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, with rosy red cheeks and long brown hair. Other than the color that the cold had given to her cheeks, she looked a bit pale. She gazed up at him with pretty hazel eyes.

"Take me home with you," she said.

He blinked. Then, seeing that that had accomplished nothing, he blinked again. If he thought that any amount of blinking would make her vanish, he was mistaken. She stubbornly refused to disappear, but stood frozen to her spot, unmoving except for her chattering teeth. Now he noticed that she was a rather thin girl wearing a coat that was probably too small for this chill. What she was doing out on a night like this dressed in clothes completely unsuited for the weather, he didn't know.

"What?" he asked.

"Take me home with you," she repeated. "I mean, let's go back to your place and... um... spend the night together."

What was he supposed to make of that? Or of her, for that matter? She was a pretty girl, if a bit dirty, but altogether too young for him. Too young to be propositioning *any* man for that matter. Was she a prostitute? Or was this some kind of police sting? No, they only did that to Internet predators, and they used young-looking adult women for the task. While it was possible that she was older than she seemed, she couldn't be more than fifteen or sixteen even taking that into consideration, much too young to be used as bait in that kind of operation.

"Do I know you?" he asked, just in case he was wrong in his assumptions. He didn't even have to feign ignorance or innocence; it was completely true.

"I'm Cassie," she smiled, but he could still hear her teeth chattering behind that smile. "I saw you walking along down the street and I thought it would be nice to get to know you better."

"But... coming home with me... you're talking about..."

"Going to bed with you, yes," she replied. Then she stamped her feet, as if to wake them up. "But let's not stand out here in the cold talking about it. Let's just do it."

Then he noticed something in her eyes that he hadn't seen before: a bit of worry. Perhaps it could be a result of nervousness; who wouldn't be nervous in her situation? But there was a much more reasonable explanation.

"Cassie," he said, "if I said no, would you have anywhere else to sleep tonight?"

The smile on her face vanished as she lowered her gaze, and he realized he had hit upon the truth. This girl was homeless, desperate, and likely to freeze to death if she couldn't find shelter for the night.

It would be a terrible inconvenience for him. She would violate his personal domain, entering his haven from the world and from humanity. He would have no retreat from the din and cacophony of civilization. He wished he could simply walk away, leaving her behind to seek out another source of shelter.

But if he did that, she might not survive the night. In the eyes of the law he would be well within his rights to refuse her, but he would be convicted by his own conscience, to serve a sentence far greater than that which society could ever impose upon him.

"Come on," he said, and her face brightened up once more with a smile. He turned and headed back toward his apartment, the girl at his side cheerfully following along. He glanced around, expecting at any moment to see half a dozen police cars surrounding him, possibly accompanied by a full television crew. The street remained mostly deserted though, and he figured he had already passed the crisis point when he accepted her offer. The truth was, he had no intention of sleeping with her. Even just talking with her would be a chore; he didn't want human company of any kind. She would spend the night in his apartment not for the sake of

friendship or companionship, but merely for survival. Then tomorrow, he would figure out some other more permanent arrangement to keep her off the street. There had to be a shelter or an orphanage or something in the city who could take her.

"So what's your name?" Cassie asked cheerfully as they walked.

"John," he replied simply.

"It's nice to meet you, John."

"Mm," he mumbled.

His apartment was only another couple of blocks away, inside a building with a plain front, quite inconspicuous actually. That suited John perfectly; it reminded him of himself.

He could hear Cassie sigh as soon as they passed through the front door into the building's stairwell. Though it wasn't particularly warm, at least it cut out the chill of the cold, November night. They ascended two flights of stairs, then John fished in his pocket for his keys as the two of them walked down the hall to his front door. Unlocking the door, he stood aside and motioned for Cassie to go on in.

The first thing he did after closing the door behind him was turn up the thermostat. Normally he liked to keep it cool to save on the heating bill, but for Cassie's sake he set it up much higher.

He glanced over at the girl and saw her unzipping her coat, her hands shaking so hard that she was having a difficult time with it. No doubt about it; the girl was half frozen already. How long had she stood there watching the snow falling down, with a growing feeling of despair as she knew that she had to do something or she wouldn't wake up in the morning? Perhaps even after she had hatched upon her plan, she had watched passers-by hurrying to get indoors, too nervous or embarrassed to go through with it. Had John been her first choice, or her twenty-first?

"Come here," he said, motioning her over to him. He helped her out of her coat, then hung it up on a peg on the wall. Then he took her hands, noticing with alarm how icy cold they felt.

"You're freezing!" he exclaimed. He placed her hands together between their bodies, then wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest. She pressed her cheek up against him, and he reached up with one of his hands and stroked her hair. He hadn't hugged anyone in years. He didn't like it, not since the disappearance of his daughter and his subsequent disillusionment with the human race. But this was an emergency, and he found it surprisingly pleasant.

The chattering of her teeth and the trembling of her frame slowly faded, and he felt the chill of her body disappear, swallowed up in warmth. Even after the danger had passed and she was back to normal, she made no move to pull away from him. He continued holding her there for another two minutes, then finally broke away.

"Thank you," she said meekly, staring at the floor.

"It's all right," he smiled. Despite his earlier fears, he found that he didn't mind her presence here all that much at all. There was a certain cheeriness that came from having a pretty girl in his apartment, a lessening of the gloom and melancholy that had haunted his life for the past ten years. Perhaps he would settle down into his depression again in a while, but for now he actually enjoyed having her here.

"Is it..." she stammered, "is it all right if we have some supper before we...?" But she couldn't complete the sentence, and the redness that returned to her cheeks had nothing to do with the cold weather.

"Listen, Cassie," he said in as soft a voice as he could manage. "I didn't bring you back to my apartment to have sex with you."

"You didn't?" she asked, her eyes opening wide in astonishment.

"No," he smiled. "I did it to get you out of the cold. Tomorrow we'll figure out a more permanent arrangement so you never have to sleep on the street again, but you're welcome to sleep here tonight."

"But I thought..." she started, but again couldn't finish the sentence.

"Thought what?"

"I thought... all men were only interested in..."

"Whatever gave you that impression?" he asked. "Most men are perfectly nice..." Now it was his turn to be astonished. For ten years he had had no faith in his fellow man, and now suddenly he was telling this girl that people were all right after all? Did he really believe that?

"That's not what my dad said," said Cassie.

"Well he was wrong. I'm sure he loved you very much--"

"No he didn't," she interrupted, staring at the floor.

"What are you talking about?"

"He went and got himself thrown in prison, dumping me on the street without a home or anyone I could turn to. So I thought maybe if I offered myself..."

"Well, there's no need for that. Tonight, you're going to sleep in my bed, but I'm going to take the couch."

"Oh, you don't have to go that far," she insisted, her gloom once more replaced by a smile. "The couch will be fine with me."

"I wouldn't hear of it."

"I'm not going to kick you out of your own bed. Just give me a blanket and a pillow and I'll sleep on the couch. It looks nice and comfortable anyway."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay, the couch it is. But if you change your mind--"

"I won't."

"Fine. Now, about supper. I'm afraid I'm not much of a cook, but I do have some leftover spaghetti in the fridge. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes in the microwave. It's either that or wait a lot longer while I attempt to fix something else that may or may not turn out."

"Spaghetti sounds delicious," she smiled.

"Good. The bathroom's down the hall. You go wash up, and I'll heat up the food. Do yourself a favor and run your hands under the warm water for a few minutes before coming back to eat."

Cassie found the bathroom and disappeared inside. John opened the fridge and pulled out the leftover spaghetti. He had figured it would provide at least three more meals, but with two mouths to feed it might not even last one, depending upon how hungry Cassie was. Fortunately, he had a head of lettuce and some carrots and celery, which he could quickly throw together as a salad, as well as a loaf of bread that would make decent garlic toast with a touch of butter and garlic powder. He preferred French bread for garlic toast, but this would have to do.

He paused, surprised and a bit amused at how much thought he was putting into dinner. Being a bachelor, he usually ate a one-dish meal. Anything more was reserved for special occasions, of which he had had very few in the last decade. Now it almost seemed like he was celebrating.

It's just to make sure she has enough to eat, he told himself.

By the time he placed the spaghetti in the microwave and gathered the ingredients for the side dishes, Cassie returned to the kitchen.

"Do you want to help?" he asked.

"Can I?"

"Sure. You start buttering the bread while I break up the lettuce for the salad."

They set to work preparing the meal, and John couldn't help but notice how enthusiastically she worked. It almost seemed like she had never been asked to help fix dinner before. He didn't know much about her father, but Cassie didn't seem to think too highly about him, so he probably hadn't been the greatest dad in the

world. He felt sorry for this girl that seemed to enjoy John's company even more than that of her father. He wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy.

They threw the garlic toast in the oven and then placed the spaghetti and salad on the table. Cassie didn't hesitate, but scooped out a big plate full of spaghetti, probably more than was healthy for a girl like her to eat. He wondered how long it had been since her last meal.

She gulped it down hungrily, and he realized that she was probably famished. She might get stomach aches eating like that, but at least her belly would be full. She was halfway through the plate of spaghetti before the garlic toast even came out of the oven.

John didn't feel much like talking during the meal, not that that was anything strange for him. And Cassie was more concerned with stuffing her face, so they ate in silence. He was actually somewhat amused by her ravenous appetite. Perhaps she was trying to store up, not knowing when she would be able to eat again.

That brought up the subject of what to do with her tomorrow. Legally he could just dump her in the street if he wanted, but despite his misanthropic attitude, he just wouldn't feel right about that. Maybe he could call the Social Services or Child Welfare or something like that in the morning. They might frown on his taking her home with him, but if he explained that he let her sleep on his couch that night because she would have otherwise frozen to death, and that he never laid a hand on her, they might be understanding.

She went through two full plates of spaghetti and a large helping of salad, not to mention three slices of garlic toast. *So much for my leftovers,* he thought as he stared at the empty dish of spaghetti. But he didn't mind; it had been a long time since he had actually done something for someone else, even something as simple as sharing a meal with them. He had forgotten how good it felt.

After she finished eating, she smiled at him in gratitude. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," he replied.

Cassie yawned and stretched then.

"Are you sleepy?" he asked. "It's a little early for me to go to bed, but if you want, I can make up the couch for you so you can get some sleep. I don't mind spending the rest of the evening in my bedroom."

"Maybe I'll go to bed in a little while," she said, "But I was wondering if you mind... if you mind if I take a bath before bed?"

He thought about that. She didn't have a change of clothes, so a bath would almost be pointless because she would have to get right back into her grubbies. On the other hand, after spending so much time out in the cold, a hot bath was probably just what she needed. Let her soak away the chill of the night.

Of course, there was an easy solution to the clothing problem. He had a washer and dryer right in the bathroom. She could throw her clothes in the washer, and have them clean in an hour or so. The only

problem was what to wear in the mean time.

"That's fine," he told her. "I'll get you one of my tee shirts to wear after your bath so you don't have to put your dirty clothes back on."

"Thanks," she smiled. "You're a really nice man, you know that?"

"I don't know where you got that impression," he joked, but secretly he enjoyed the compliment.

She followed him to his bedroom, where he rummaged through his drawers in search of a suitable shirt. He decided upon a plain green one that was a little too big even for him. Since her pants would naturally go into the washer with her shirt, he figured a bigger one would cover more of her legs. She probably had really nice legs for a girl her age, but it wouldn't be appropriate for him to look at them.

He handed her the shirt and led her into the bathroom. As she went over to the tub and began to fill it, he put some detergent into the washing machine and turned the dial to the setting for a small load.

"Cassie, after you undress," he told her, "just throw your clothes in here. Once the tub is filled, press this button on the washer. Don't do it before the tub is filled, or it will steal your hot water. There are towels in the closet here. Do you understand?"

She nodded. Then he had a sudden thought, and opened the medicine cabinet behind the mirror above the sink. He had an unopened toothbrush there that he had bought because his current one was getting old, but he hadn't yet disposed of it. He set the new one down on the counter, along with a tube of toothpaste. "Here you go," he told her. "Be sure to brush your teeth before going to bed tonight."

John left the bathroom and closed the door behind him, listening for the telltale click as she locked it. It never came. He wondered about that; for some reason she trusted him. Not that there was any reason not to. The touch of other human beings still disturbed him, so he certainly had no inclination to molest her. But she didn't know that.

Leaving her to her bath, he opened the hall closet and withdrew a couple of blankets and a spare pillow. The pillow smelled kind of musty, so he put a new pillow case on it, then brought the bundle out to the couch, where he fixed it up to be hopefully nice and comfortable. As an afterthought, he brought out one more blanket and placed it, folded, on the floor beside the couch, just in case she got cold during the night and needed it. Then he sat down in a nearby chair and turned on the television to pass the time until she finished her bath.

He avoided the news; it was always the same depressing thing. Bad people doing bad things. Bad people like the man who had taken his Mary away from him. So he found a nice sitcom instead. Watching people in funny situations always helped to take his mind off of the gloomy depression of his own existence.

Soon enough, Cassie emerged from the bathroom. Her damp hair hung in streams about her shoulder, and the oversized tee-shirt hung limply about her figure. All cleaned up like that, he realized that she really was a

pretty girl. Especially with that smile on her face. For some reason she seemed to enjoy his company.

"Here you go," he told her, indicating the couch. "You'll sleep here. If you want to watch TV before going to sleep, here's the remote. There's an extra blanket on the floor if you get cold, and you can always go into the kitchen to get a drink of water if you want. The cups are in the cupboard next to the sink. Is there anything else you need?"

She nodded.

"What?" he asked.

"Tuck me in?"

He sighed. He should have expected that. Cassie lay down on the couch, and he couldn't help but notice that he had been right about her legs. They *were* rather nice. He only allowed himself a quick glimpse at them; he shouldn't be thinking things like that after all. Then he drew up the blanket over her.

He was about to leave, but she immediately grabbed his hand. "Don't go," she said. "Stay here and talk to me." She gazed up at him with a happy yet pleading look in her eyes, and he found that her touch was not as disturbing as he expected it to be.

"You wouldn't like me talking to you," he mumbled. "I'm not a very good conversationalist."

"I don't mind," said Cassie.

He sighed in resignation, and pulled up the nearest chair. Cassie refused to release his hand, so he simply let her hold it.

"So what do you want to talk about?" he asked her.

"Let's talk about you," she smiled.

"I'd rather not."

"Why not? Is there something wrong?"

"Yes. But that's all I'm going to say about that."

"Oh, come on, John. Don't be like that. Look, if it will make it any easier, why don't you just answer my questions. Are you married?"

"No."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Do you live here alone?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you get married?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Were you ever married?"

"Yes."

"What happened to your wife?"

"We split up."

"Why?"

"You're really nosy, you know that?" he asked.

"Just trying to be friendly." She said it with a smile on her face, and he immediately felt bad about snapping at her. There was something about this girl that intrigued him. She had gone through hard times herself, and yet somehow, she remained cheerful throughout the ordeal. She was friendly, outgoing, cheery, in short just the opposite of him.

"So what about you?" asked John, deliberately changing the subject.

"What do you want to know about me?"

"Well... do you go to school?"

"No," she replied. "My dad didn't want me to."

"You mean he home-schooled you?"

She shook her head. "He ignored me."

"You mean you haven't ever gone to school?" asked John, shocked. "Does that mean you're illiterate?"

"No," she replied, then with a note of pride in her voice, added, "I taught myself how to read."

"Really?" he asked.

"My dad didn't want me going to school because he didn't want anyone to know he had a daughter. So I

begged him to buy me some books so I could learn to read on my own. At first he couldn't be bothered to buy them, but I pestered him until he gave in just so that I would stop bugging him about it. He got me some first-grade level books and I started there, then I started getting on the Internet and reading everything I could."

"That's pretty impressive," said John, and he meant it. This was a bright young girl, a girl who had been given a horrible deal, but who had made more of it than he thought possible.

"So why didn't your dad want anyone to know he had a daughter?" asked John.

"That's something *I'd* rather not talk about," she replied simply.

He really couldn't fault her for such an answer; he had been as reluctant, if not more so, to speak about his past. Though he was still curious about her, he decided not to push it.

"So do you have any friends?" he asked instead, changing the subject.

"Just one."

"That's good. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A man," she smiled. "You."

He stared at her. He hadn't been anyone's friend in ten years. Why should this little girl, who hardly knew him, consider him a friend? True, he had taken her in, given her food and a place to sleep for the night, but he hadn't been particularly sociable or friendly. She could learn a thing or two about trusting strangers.

He heard the buzzer on the washer, so he got up and headed into the bathroom to throw her clothes into the dryer. He noticed as he handled them that they were a little threadbare and frayed along the edges, and he wondered how often her father had bought her new things. The man sounded like a real creep, the type who should get locked up for child neglect. Well, he was behind bars now, probably for something unrelated because otherwise Cassie would be in protective custody right now.

He turned on the dryer, then returned to the living room. Why he did that, he didn't know. He would have been much more comfortable just staying in his own bedroom until the clothes were done. But something intrigued him about this girl. For some reason, it didn't really bother him to be spending time with her.

She gave him a smile when he sat down in the same chair. Fortunately, she didn't take his hand this time, but continued to stare at him. It wasn't a stare of surprise, or curiosity, or even boredom. She had a smile on her face the whole time, as if she were just happy to be looking at him.

To get his mind off it, he decided to strike up a conversation.

"So how long were you on the street?" he asked her.

"Um... four days," she said.

"Four days?"

She nodded. "Four days ago was when my dad got arrested. I came home and saw a whole bunch of police cars out in front of my house. So I ran away."

"Why did you run?"

"Because I didn't want to go to prison."

"Why would you go to prison?"

She shrugged. "Cops always find a reason. If they don't like you, they'll plant drugs on you or something. Then you go to prison and get gang raped in the showers."

"Who told you that?"

"My dad."

John sighed. Clearly her father had been teaching her the wrong things.

"Cassie, it sounds like your dad just didn't like police. And for good reason. He was a criminal. So you shouldn't take everything he says at face value. Most police are good, honest people who want to protect you, not arrest you."

"How do you know my dad was a criminal? Maybe the cops just made something up so they could arrest him."

"Do you believe that?" he asked.

She stared at him for a minute. "No," she finally said. "I know my dad did a lot of things he shouldn't have, so you're probably right. Anyways, it doesn't matter now."

"Right. From now on things will be different. You'll be taken care of."

"Are you going to take care of me?"

"No. Tomorrow I'm going to figure out what to do with you, but I promise, I won't just throw you out on the street. And I won't call the police either."

"Can't I stay here with you?"

"No."

"Please? I promise I won't be a nuisance."

"Cassie, you're a sweet girl, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to give you what you need. You need to find a family who will love you and care for you. I feel really sorry for you if you think *I'm* a nice man. You'll find out soon enough that there are a lot better people than me in this world."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, it's true. Now you just go ahead and get some sleep."

"I'm not sleepy."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Despite her claim, she closed her eyes, but she kept a cute little half-smile on her lips. He found himself gazing at her face for the longest time. Maybe it was because she had her eyes closed, but he realized that this was the longest time in ten years that he had actually looked someone in the face. Normally he found it disturbing, like staring at a cockroach rather than a human being, but right now it felt peaceful and soothing.

She called me her friend... he thought. Why did that thrill him so much, when usually he considered "friend" to be a dirty word?

Suddenly, she opened her eyes again. Noticing him watching her, she gave him a smile. "John," she said, "how come you met me stay here?"

"Because you would have frozen to death otherwise."

"But it wasn't your responsibility."

"Well then, why did you ask me to? I mean, why me in particular?"

Cassie blushed at that. "It's just that..." she said, then paused. "I thought I was going to have to... um..."

"Oh," he nodded, with a friendly smile to try to ease her embarrassment.

"So I just looked for someone I thought I could do it with."

"And you thought I... um..."

"Yeah," she said, turning even brighter red. "There's just something about your face. You're handsome, and sort of... I don't know... you looked like a really kind man."

He couldn't believe the thrill he got from her compliments. Maybe he was handsome, although he hadn't thought about it much. But kind? She thought he looked kind? She obviously wasn't the best judge of character. Still, it felt good to hear her say it.

She yawned, and he felt a strange urge to reach out and run his hand gently through her hair. He wasn't sure

what triggered that reaction in him, except perhaps that her sleepiness made him feel like he was watching over her, and that role as her guardian brought him just a little bit closer to her. The yawn ended in another smile as she gazed up at him from her reclined position on the couch.

"John?" she said again.

"What is it, Cassie?"

"How do you know... if you love someone?"

The question took him aback. "What? How should I know?" he asked.

"You said you were married once. Doesn't that mean that you were in love?"

He sighed. "That was a long time ago."

"But you remember, don't you?"

"I've been trying not to."

"Why?"

"Because it hurts. Yes, Cassie, I know what it means to love someone. I also know what it means to lose them. They say it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, but I'm afraid I just can't agree with that."

"So how do you know if you love someone?" she asked again.

"I don't know. You just do. Haven't you ever loved anyone? What about your father?"

"No," she stated. "I didn't even like him, much less love him. And he didn't like me either."

"So he never played with you? Never bought you toys or anything when you were a little girl?"

"Well yeah, but only to get me to shut up. He hated to hug me, too. I don't think I've had anyone hug me for five years. Except you." She gave him a little smile as she said it.

"Oh, that," he said. "That was just to warm you up."

"I know, but it felt really nice. Didn't you think it felt really nice?"

"I guess so," he shrugged, and he saw the smile widen on her face.

"I'm glad you were the one I picked," she told him. "I was worried at first, but now I feel so comfortable with you, I wish I could stay with you forever."

He sighed. "That's probably not a good idea. I'd probably end up being more like your father than you realize. Anyway, I think I'll go to bed now."

"Don't go," she pleaded, grabbing his hand again. "Stay here with me."

"Cassie..."

"Please? At least until I go to sleep."

"Only if you promise to go to sleep right away."

"Okay," she nodded, then closed her eyes. She made no move to release his hand though.

Once again he found himself losing himself in her face. She really was a pretty girl, now that she had been cleaned up. It was a shame that she couldn't stay with him.

Where had *that* thought come from? He couldn't believe his own thoughts. But there was something intriguing about this girl, something that challenged his inherent mistrust of the human race. Cassie was simple, ingenuous, and sincere.

She called me handsome! he thought again, with pride. Why that should make him feel so good, he didn't know. Maybe it had just been so long since anyone had complimented him that he forgot what it felt like.

After a while, he deduced from the slow rising and falling of her chest and the cute little way that she had her mouth slightly open as she breathed that she had fallen asleep, and when he glanced over at the clock on the wall he realized with surprise that he had been staring at her for over half an hour. That made it official; he had now spent more time in Cassie's presence than he had spent with anyone in a decade.

He went to check on her clothes in the dryer. She was probably anxious to get back into them; his shirt provided a little cover, but she probably felt half-naked in it.

He opened the dryer door and reached in to feel if the clothes were dry. The pants were thickest and most likely to take longer, but they seemed just fine. He closed the dryer door again and made his way out to the front room to let her know she wouldn't have to sleep all night in his shirt. He knew that on a cold night like this he enjoyed putting on clothes fresh from the dryer, and she probably would too.

When he returned to the front room, however, she looked so peaceful and calm lying there asleep that he didn't have the heart to wake her. During their conversation the blanket had fallen down until it lay bunched up around her waist, so he drew it up to her chin, gently tucking her in. The fatherly gesture reminded him of when he used to do this to his own little girl. The reminder should have bothered him, but instead it gave him a moment of cheery nostalgia as his paternal feelings took over. Before he realized what he was doing, he leaned over and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

He pulled away, shocked at what he had done. It wasn't so much that he had overstepped his bounds; more

importantly, he had actually *wanted* to do it. He hadn't felt like kissing *anybody* in the past ten years, even on the forehead. Yet seeing her sleeping like that, he had felt an overwhelming urge to do so.

Bothered by his own actions, he slipped quietly into his bedroom and lay down in bed, unable to get his mind off of the girl that lay sleeping on the couch in the living room.

The nightmare returned that night. At first it had been every night, threatening his very sanity. As the years passed, however, it diminished in frequency, and fortunately, in intensity as well. But it never went away entirely. How could it? It wasn't so much a dream as a memory.

Sometimes the details were different, but the core was the same. He went through the motions of putting his daughter Mary in the car seat, all the while knowing what would happen. No matter how hard he tried to do something else, his body always repeated the same motions. Then he returned to the house, where the phone rang. He answered it, listening to the person on the other end. The phone call was always different in the dream; sometimes it was from his relatives, sometimes from friends, sometimes from neighbors, sometimes from complete strangers. Sometimes it varied between the different options in the same dream, maintaining a dreamlike fluidity of the situation. This time he heard the car drive away, and even saw it out the front window, staring into the evil-looking eyes of a driver who otherwise had no face.

He threw down the telephone and tried chase after the car. Somehow he found himself outside, and the vehicle hadn't yet picked up enough speed. He could almost reach out and grab the back bumper.

But his foot got caught in the phone cord, and he missed the car by inches. As he tried to disentangle himself from the cord that had suddenly become an intricate knot around his ankle, he watched in helplessness as the car drove down the street. As it pulled away, he saw Mary happily waving goodbye from the back window.

For some reason, that sight frightened him worse than anything. He almost would have preferred to see her scared or crying as she was taken away from her family. But instead she cheerfully accepted her fate, implying that this was the way it was supposed to be and nothing anyone did would ever change it.

He awoke to a lonely room and a damp pillow, an all-too common occurrence. He hated the night time, with its bad dreams and empty stillness leaving him bare to his worst thoughts and memories, a hell worse than the fire and brimstone that the darkest sermon could conjure up.

Something moved in the darkness, and he glanced over at the shadowy shape standing near his bed. It was a small shape, a child.

"Are you okay?" asked Cassie in a meek and hesitant voice.

He broke down into tears again. Of course he wasn't okay. He hadn't been okay for ten years. There was no

solace from the miserable existence he had been living for a decade.

Then he felt her hand on his arm. It was such a small gesture, but suddenly very comforting. In the last ten years he had come to hate the touch of another human being, but right now all of that hate disappeared in an instant. Cassie just wanted to make him feel better.

He sat up and threw his arms around her, hugging her tightly and letting the tears flow. Here was someone who knew a little of what he was going through. Like John, Cassie had nobody in the world. She was alone and afraid and unable to deal with life at the moment. But they were together now, and that was at least some comfort.

He felt her wrap her own arms around him, and he let the little girl's touch soothe him. Their roles were suddenly reversed; now he was the child and she was the parent, a mother figure comforting her little boy in the darkness of the night.

"It was just a bad dream," he mumbled, though that wasn't entirely the truth.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I have bad dreams too sometimes. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he replied. The last thing he wanted to do was confess his darkest fears and memories to a perfect stranger.

Then she did something that caught him completely off his guard. She kissed him on the cheek.

He pulled back, astonished. It had been a long time since he had been kissed, even a friendly peck like that. With his withdrawal into himself, he had put up a front of a cold and emotionless man, perhaps a little creepy even, that tended to frighten people away. But Cassie had somehow found her way past that, and discovered the timid and shy man underneath. She had even burrowed past his hatred and gloom, finding the man he had once been, the warm and caring person full of love and joy. That was the only explanation for her actions.

As he thought about it, he realized that that person still existed. No matter how much he wrapped that side of him up in anger and bitterness, in callous unfeeling, he was still the same person he had been ten years ago before all this started.

Before he realized what was happening, Cassie lifted up the covers and climbed into bed next to him. "I don't want to be alone tonight," she explained, "and I don't think you want to either."

She was right, he realized with astonishment. He had thought that the only cure for his melancholy was to withdraw completely from the human race, to block himself off from all the reminders that there were people out there who would steal three-year-old girls from loving families. But in doing so he had forgotten that there were also little girls out there who needed to be rescued from the cold, who needed men like John Burke to care for them. Cassie was so affectionate and adorable, a beautiful child who reflected what he had once been, someone who needed to give and receive love.

He had locked himself away from humanity because the object of his love, his little Mary, had been suddenly taken from him. Now here was Cassie, a sweet girl who wanted to be close to him. And now he realized that he had been wrong all along. What he needed was not isolation, but for someone to take Mary's place in his heart.

When she kissed him on the cheek again, his heart melted. He needed this girl every bit as much as she needed him. He kissed her back, on the forehead. Then she surprised him by kissing him on the lips.

"What...?" he began.

"I love you, John," she said, catching him completely off guard. How could she love him? She had only known him for a couple of hours.

"You can't love me," he exclaimed, shocked. "You just met me. And besides, I'm... I'm... unlovable."

"That's not true!" she insisted. "You're gentle, and kind, and sweet, not to mention handsome."

"But Cassie, I already told you that you don't have to do this."

"I know. This isn't about obligation, or even gratitude. This is about wanting to be with you."

"Oh god!" he groaned, thinking about what it would feel like to hold this girl in his arms, to feel the soft skin of her body against him, to experience ultimate pleasure with her. It had been a long time, a *very* long time, since he had even been attracted to a woman, much less made love to her. And now this little girl, this child who had somehow found her way into his heart, stood here in front of him, offering herself to him.

"But I..." he stammered. "I can't..."

"Yes you can," she said. Then she reached down and took hold of the bottom of her shirt, lifting it over her head to discard it to the side. In the darkness he could barely make out the shape of her nude body, but the little that he could see delighted him. He had never been attracted to girls that young before, but he felt his manhood swelling in his shorts as Cassie lay down beside him, pressing her soft and warm body against his side. He couldn't believe how wonderful it felt; he had almost forgotten what it was like. For the past decade he had managed to suppress the needs and desires of his body; it wasn't hard to do when contact with another human being made his skin crawl. But now those desires broke through the shell in which he had wrapped them, and he found himself reaching out to the girl. Before he knew what was happening, he had reached around her and pulled her over on top of him, kissing her passionately and almost desperately on the lips.

Knowing that he couldn't hope to win the battle inside, he decided to just surrender and enjoy himself. This girl was so eager and willing to do this; it wasn't like he was taking advantage of her after all. Holding her tightly to him and luxuriating in the smooth silkiness of her skin, he was astonished that he had managed to go so many years without such pleasure. How could he have ever survived that long without seeking out the gentle touch of a beautiful woman?

Best of all was the kiss. He reveled in the taste of her lips and the intimacy of the gesture. She claimed to love him, and he could feel her sincerity in that kiss. The beautiful young Cassie actually loved him, when he had thought for the longest time that he was unlovable. The idea was so foreign to him, he had a hard time comprehending that she really felt that way toward him.

After a while he broke the kiss, but only so that he could move his lips to her neck. He let his lips wander all over her neck and shoulders, kissing her tenderly yet passionately. It was all coming back to him. He knew how to make love to a woman, despite his long dry spell. From the quiet whimpering and moaning coming from the girl, he could tell that she was beginning to feel it, beginning to respond to his touch.

He rolled her over onto her back and lay beside her, letting one of his hands come up to gently stroke her hip as he continued to kiss her. Her breathing grew heavier at the excitement of his ministrations, and he loved the sound. She might be doing this for his benefit, but he realized that he took just as much pleasure in making her feel good as in letting her make him feel good. Before the night was through, Cassie would know what it felt like to be loved.

John slid his hand off of her hip and rubbed her stomach for a couple of minutes. He remembered that his ex-wife had always enjoyed it when he did that. It was like a massage, helping her to relax even as it got her more excited. John loved the way her smooth flesh felt on his hand, so soft and delicate.

But there was so much more to her that he wanted to explore. After massaging her for a few minutes, he ran his hand up her body, very slowly but with his intentions obvious, so as not to startle her. He moved up over the bottom of her rib cage, noting with just a little worry how little flesh there was over them. No doubt she had been half starved when he had taken her off the street. No wonder she had eaten so much at dinner time.

Finally he reached her breast, and he heard her let out a quiet gasp as he cupped it in his hands. He fondled her gently, prepared to remove his hand at a moment's notice if she protested. But she did nothing to stop him, so he let himself enjoy the feel of her small breast in his hands. She obviously still had a lot of growing to do, but she had plenty of time to do it. There was something particularly delightful about the immaturity of her underdeveloped body; perhaps he had a touch of pedophile in him after all.

He felt one of her hands move to his chest and he froze for a moment as he wondered whether she was trying to push him away. But she gently rubbed him like he had rubbed her earlier, so he continued to caress her body. Cassie's hand wandered lower to his stomach, but she didn't stop there. A moment later he felt her run her fingers over the bulge in his shorts, and even in the darkness he could almost see her smiling in delight. He let her take her time to explore it, tracing the shaft from the head all the way down to the base, where she cupped his balls in her hand for a minute. Since her father hadn't paid much attention to her, no doubt he hadn't restricted her Internet habits, so she had probably seen hundreds of cocks in photos and videos. But likely this was her first time with the real thing.

After playing with him outside of his shorts for a few minutes, she lifted her fingers up to his stomach, but then she straightened her hand and slipped it under the waistband. Now it was his turn to gasp as she wrapped her hand around his cock.

"It's so hard and warm," she whispered. "Are you... are you going to put that inside me?"

"That's up to you, sweetheart," said John. "I'll only do it if you want me to."

"I want you to," she replied. "Can I take it out?"

"Absolutely. In fact, I think it's time I took off the rest of my clothes anyway."

"Can I do it?" she asked.

"Sure."

The two of them sat up. Cassie crawled to the edge of the bed and sat there with her feet dangling over the side while John climbed off and stood in front of her. She reached out with one of her small hands and took hold of the top of his shorts.

"Go ahead, honey," he encouraged, so she pulled downward. He felt the cloth lowering, exposing everything to her view. Granted, it was still dark enough that she probably didn't get a good look, but he felt a thrill at standing naked in front of a gorgeous young girl like Cassie. His shorts fell to the floor, and he stepped out of them. She immediately reached out and grasped his cock again, gently stroking it up and down. He moaned as she pumped him, letting himself enjoy the pleasure that her young hand gave him.

He noticed that her other hand slipped between her own legs. It was probably unconscious; she probably didn't even know she was doing it. John reached out with his own hand and slipped it gently underneath hers. "Why don't you let me do that, Cassie," he offered.

"Okay," she smiled.

"Lie down," he told her, and she immediately did so without releasing his cock. John returned his hand to its position between her legs, which she immediately spread to give him better access. He heard her start to whimper again as he caressed her there, feeling the hot moistness of what he presumed to be her virgin pussy. For a moment he hesitated, wondering whether he should really go through with this. After all, this would be her first time, and she would always remember it. He wanted it to be a fond memory, a special memory. The he realized that that was really up to him. He had the power to make this a beautiful experience for her, and he resolved to try his hardest to do just that.

She was already damp there, and she just grew wetter as he fondled her. She was young enough to have only a sparse covering of hair down there, mostly above the lips, so there was nothing to prevent her juices from just dripping down to the bedsheets. He didn't mind that a bit; he *wanted* to get the sheets wet with her nectar. He wanted to sleep in a bed covered in the smell of her arousal.

He climbed back into bed next to her, then lowered his head and sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, causing her to cry out in glee. He ran his tongue all over it, teasing her mercilessly and driving her wild with lust and passion. She reached out with her free hand and grabbed his head, mashing his face into her chest.

That served to fuel his own lust, and he sucked and licked even harder. By now each of her breaths came as a deep and prolonged gasp; she was nearly hyperventilating. He could tell that she was almost ready for him.

He moved his hips in toward her so that he could run the tip of his cock around her thighs. He could just reach the outer lips of her pussy with the tip, so he rubbed it up and down, getting it slick from her own moisture. He realized that if he kept going like this, he would go off before he even got it inside her.

He lifted his head, then kissed her on the lips once more. "Cassie," he said, "I'm going to do it now."

"Okay," she whispered back.

He rolled over on top of her, supporting himself on his hands just above her shoulders and his knees between her widely spread legs. He took his cock and pressed it into the groove between her outer lips, gently pressing downward until he hit the barrier at the entrance. It didn't surprise him that it was there; she had already claimed that she didn't know what it felt like to be loved, so naturally she was still a virgin. It actually came as a relief; considering what he knew of her father, he wouldn't have been surprised if he had molested her.

"Cassie," he said, "I have to push through. It's going to--"

"--hurt," she finished for him. "I know all about that. It's okay, John. I want this, pain and all."

"Okay," he said, then kissed her once more. "On the count of three. One, two, three!" He shoved his hips forward, and suddenly he felt the barrier give way. Cassie cried out once, then he was through and lodged in the hot tightness of her pussy.

"Are you all right, baby?" he asked her, and she nodded.

"It's okay," she replied. "It wasn't that bad. But just wait for a minute, 'kay?"

"Sure. You're a very brave girl." Although he kept most of his body still, he kissed her all over her face, even tasting the saltiness of her tears. It hurt him to think of the pain he had caused her, but at least it was all over now, and it would only get better from now on.

After a few minutes, Cassie gave a couple of tentative thrusts with her hips, then signaled that it was okay for him to go on. John pulled back, then pressed into her again, going a little deeper this time. Cassie sucked in her breath at the motion, but he could tell it was from pleasure rather than from pain. That gave him the encouragement he needed to continue, so he thrust into her again and again. He made it gentle, tender even, though still strong and deep enough to keep her excitement and arousal high. He hugged her tiny young body to his own as he made passionate love to her, enjoying the exquisite sensation of her body all over his own. This was it, the ultimate expression of their love for each other.

Yes, he realized, he loved her too. He had considered himself unlovable partly because he thought he was incapable of love, but now he realized that he was neither. Cassie had cut right through the lies and brought

out his true self.

He continued to kiss her, and she kissed him back. It wasn't enough to just feel the physical sensations of the act, though they were certainly enjoyable. No, he wanted this to be more than just sex. It was a union of these two people who had been isolated from humanity for so long. He wanted Cassie to feel warm, protected, safe, and above all, loved.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him as he thrust into her body, embracing him tightly. Perhaps she felt the same way he did. She had turned this into a hug, a gesture of friendship and caring, with just a touch of intimacy. Of course, they had moved far beyond merely intimate, but he still recognized her need to feel close to him.

He had been so long without a woman in his life that he had just assumed that he would be the first to climax, but Cassie surprised him. Without warning, her body tensed up, and she held him in an almost deathlike grip, squeezing him so tight it almost hurt. At the same time, her pussy clamped down hard on his cock, increasing the already nearly unbelievable tightness. A sound started in her throat, beginning as a tight rattle as the tenseness in her body permitted nothing more, but then building in volume until it became a wail of extreme pleasure.

The sublime sound of the girl in such ecstasy pushed him over the edge as well. He shoved deep inside her one last time, feeling the pressure building in his loins and the pleasure spiking until he could stand it no longer. For a moment, time froze and the two lovers held each other as motionless as statues. Then he felt his cock twitch as the pleasure exploded, and he shot his seed deep inside her body. Over and over it pulsed, spurting again and again.

Slowly, gradually, the pleasure ebbed, and he found himself coming down from that erotic high into a satisfied exhaustion. It took all his endurance not to just collapse on top of Cassie. Being probably less than half his weight, she probably wouldn't appreciate that. But he still held her in his arms for several seconds before finally rolling over off of her and lying down beside her on the bed.

"That was the best experience of my whole life," Cassie told him with a smile, taking his hand in hers. "I'm so glad I picked you."

"Me too," he replied, for the first time not surprised to realize it was true. He closed his eyes and let the exhaustion and bliss overcome him. He dropped off to sleep and the first pleasant dreams he had had in ten years.

When he awoke in the morning, he lay with his eyes closed for the longest time. As the sleepiness of the night fled with the emotional power of his dreams, and wakefulness brought with it a clear head and rational logic, he remembered what had happened during the night. It had been so wonderful, so beautiful, and surprisingly not the least bit disturbing. He had thought he would hate himself in the morning, but instead he felt a smile creep onto his face as he thought about the beautiful girl who had suddenly come into his life, so

ingenuous yet mysterious at the same time. She was like a fairy or an elf, a creature more of magic than of substance, an ephemeral apparition so contrary to the set of beliefs that he had wrapped himself in that he found her almost impossible to believe in.

But she had brought with her a new set of beliefs, a new way of looking at the world, and for the first time in a decade he found himself wanting to spend time with another human being. Cassie was his own guardian angel.

He kept his eyes shut tight on the off chance that he had dreamed it all. Maybe she had never visited him in the night. Maybe she lay asleep on the couch in the other room. Or maybe she had never existed at all; she could be a hallucination brought about by his self-imposed isolation. He feared that if he opened his eyes, the last remnants of the dream would fade away and he would find himself alone again, a bitter man in an uncaring world.

But what if she were real? The thought that this girl had truly approached him on a cold autumn night and found her way into his heart was worth the chance that he had gone mad, so finally, after lying there motionless for nearly half an hour, he opened his eyes and turned them to the young girl sleeping beside him.

There she was, as real and tangible as John himself. Cassie had not yet woken, so he took the time to gaze upon her beauty. She had her clothes off, and for the first time he got a good look at her body. She was a little skinny, but otherwise quite lovely. With such a tiny little body, he wondered where the hell she had put all that spaghetti she had eaten last night.

He reached out and placed his hand on her stomach, gently caressing her there. He remembered now how soft a girl's skin could be, how delightful to the touch. He remembered when he used to wake up before his wife and lie there just watching her sleep. There was something so relaxing and fulfilling about the sight of a beautiful woman with her eyes closed, slumbering peacefully away. It was the same with Cassie.

He should feel guilty about what he had done to this girl. He should hate himself for it. But the girl had wanted it, even more than John had. She had been the one to climb into his bed, practically begging him to make love to her.

Love. How long had it been since that word was a part of his vocabulary? He hadn't had a reason to use it in the longest time; he had practically forgotten what it meant. But now, gazing down on the angelic face of the beautiful girl in his bed, thinking about how she had clung to him last night, how he had cried in her arms after the nightmare, how they had both found a moment of joy together after so many years of sorrow, John Burke wondered if maybe he loved this girl.

Certainly he had thought so last night, but he couldn't trust his thoughts in the heat of passion. Now that he could think with a clear head, he realized that his feelings toward her hadn't changed since then at all.

After several minutes of him tenderly caressing her, Cassie yawned, then hummed in contentment, sounding much like a cat purring. She opened her eyes and stared around groggily, then when her eyes fell on him, her face lit up with a smile.

"Good morning, Cassie," he told her, returning that smile. That was another thing he hadn't done much in the past ten years.

"G'morning, John," she replied. Then she reached out with one hand, wrapped it around his neck, and drew him down for a kiss. He considered resisting, but decided after what they had done last night, it was really rather pointless to try to draw lines now.

When they broke the kiss, Cassie smiled again. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?" he asked.

"For being everything I need right now."

"You don't really mean that," he said, but he couldn't help grinning at the compliment.

"Of course I do," she insisted. "I needed someone to take me in from the cold. I needed someone to talk to. And I especially needed someone to show me what it means to be loved."

"Cassie," he said seriously. "Love and sex aren't--"

"--the same thing," she finished for him. "I know. But what we shared last night was more than just sex, wasn't it?"

"I'd like to think so," he smiled. "Anyway, we'll talk about it later. I'm going to take a shower. You can use the bathroom down the hall to take a shower yourself. Your clothes from yesterday are still in the dryer."

Cassie nodded, then the two of them climbed out of bed. He couldn't help but admire her young body as she stood up. Impulsively, she threw her arms around him and hugged him, then turned and headed out the door.

John headed into the bathroom to shower. As he stood under the hot water, he couldn't help continuing his thoughts about the girl who had suddenly come into his life. Despite originally not wanting to take her in, he realize that all of the bitterness and revulsion he expected to feel from having her invade his personal domain just wasn't there. At worst he felt neutral toward her presence, but in all honesty he had so far enjoyed spending this time with her. It wasn't about the sex, though admittedly he had *really* enjoyed that. But more importantly, he remembered what it felt like to have someone need him. Cassie had said that he was everything she needed, but those very words were just what *John* needed at that moment.

He loved these feelings that she inspired in him, these long dormant emotions that had once been a part of his life but for the longest time had been locked away in a hidden part of his soul. They were addicting. Cassie made him want to be the man he once was, not the broken and ruined man, so bitter and full of hate, that he had become.

John realized that he had a choice to make. He stood at a crossroads in his life, with Cassie as the focal point. If he looked for someone else to take care of her, he could return to his miserable yet comfortable existence

as a misanthropic hermit who wanted nothing to do with the rest of the world. But if he took the other path, the unfamiliar road so full of pitfalls and promises, if he asked Cassie to stay with him permanently, then just maybe he could return to civilization and become a normal human being again.

In the end, it was no choice at all.

He finished his shower, then dressed and went looking for Cassie. He found her sitting at the kitchen table munching on a bowl of cereal, dressed in her clothes from yesterday. A bit wrinkled from the dryer, they still looked much better than they had last night; he hadn't realized at the time how dirty they were but he could see the contrast now.

Cassie smiled at him as soon as he entered the room, and he smiled back.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "I got a little hungry."

"The only thing I mind," he replied, "is that you're eating cold cereal on a special occasion like this. Why don't I fix us some bacon and eggs instead?"

"Okay!" she exclaimed cheerfully.

He rummaged through the refrigerator for everything they needed for breakfast. Knowing how big her appetite could be, he decided to add toast and jam to the menu as well.

It took him only a few minutes to fry up the bacon and eggs, during which time Cassie finished off her bowl of cereal. That was fine with him; he would have just thrown it out anyway, so it was just as well that she ate it. Then he served up a plate of bacon and eggs and let her eat as much as she wanted. He probably should have warned her not to eat so much that she got a stomach ache, but she seemed to enjoy it so much that he didn't have the heart to tell her to stop.

After breakfast, she graciously offered to help him clean up the dishes, probably looking for ways to repay his kindness. Though he didn't mind doing the dishes himself, he had her help him rinse and dry them. They still had the plates from last night's dinner to deal with as well, so they stood together talking and happily working for ten minutes as he tried to think of how to tell her what was on his mind.

After cleaning up, he went to sit down on the couch, not surprised that she followed him out to the living room. When he sat down, she immediately took a seat next to him.

Suddenly, impulsively, he threw his arms around Cassie. She giggled, but a moment later she wrapped her own arms around his neck and gave him a squeeze.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"I just needed a hug," he smiled. He couldn't believe it. John Burke, who had hated the human race for ten years, needed a hug!

He released her, but took her hands in his own. She continued to smile at him, a sweet and innocent expression without guile or hypocrisy. He suddenly realized that that was what he had been missing all these years. He needed to find someone who didn't try to cover themselves in masks, playing games and hiding their true selves; yet when all those layers were stripped away, it left a good and caring person underneath. He had been focused on all the wickedness and evil of the human race that he had forgotten that there were people out there like this little girl who sat here at his side.

"So Cassie, I've been thinking," he said. "I like you. A lot. I think I might even be falling in love with you. Last night I thought it a terrible inconvenience to bring you home with me, because I don't like being around people."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. The truth is that I'm glad we met. For some reason I really feel comfortable with you, like I haven't felt comfortable with anyone for... well, for a long time."

"I feel comfortable with you too," she smiled. "There's something really familiar about your face, something really... nice."

"I'm glad," replied John. "So here's the problem. If anyone ever found out what we did last night, I would end up going to prison, just like your dad, and you would end up on the street again. It would break my heart if that were to happen to you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not going to tell anyone."

"I appreciate that, but it's not that simple. You see, I want you to stay with me. Permanently."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes lighting up with delight. He had hoped for that kind of reaction. Maybe it simply meant that she was relieved she wouldn't have to look for a place to stay any more, but he liked to think that she enjoyed his company as much as he enjoyed hers.

"Does that mean you want to stay with me too?" he asked.

"Of course I do. You're the nicest man I ever met."

"And what about... um... sleeping arrangements? I mean, you kind of caught me off my guard last night."

"I know," she said, blushing. "I just thought it felt so good to have someone actually care about me. You've been so sweet, I just... I wanted to know what it felt like to have someone love me... I mean, to go all the way."

"So you enjoyed it too?"

She nodded.

"And would you like to sleep with me from now on?"

She nodded again.

"I'd like that too," he continued. "But there are complications. Like I said, no one else can know about it. And that means we have to pretend. We're going to have to do something to make it all look legitimate."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to adopt you. I don't know what it would take, or if it's even legally possible, but if it is, that would solve all of our problems."

"Okay," she smiled.

"Good. So if we're going to do this, I'll need to do some research to figure out what it would take. That means I'm going to have to know a little more about you. Your dad's in prison, but where's your mom?"

"I never had a mom," she replied.

"You mean she died before you were old enough to know her?"

"No. It's kind of... complicated. And my dad told me never to tell anyone."

"Honey, I think under the circumstances, you should probably disobey him just this once."

"Okay," she sighed. "He wasn't even my real dad."

"He was your stepdad?"

"Sort of. He..." Then she hesitated.

"It's okay," John soothed. "If it's painful, you don't have to tell me right now. But you're going to have to tell me sooner or later if I'm going to adopt you."

"No, I want to tell you. It's just that for so long, he said that if anyone ever found out, he would go to prison and I would end up on the streets. That's the only reason I stayed with him, because I was scared."

"But he already went to prison, Cassie. And you did end up on the streets. But that's all over now, because you're with me, and I'm going to take care of you. So there's no reason to hold anything back."

She sighed. "I guess so. It's just that after keeping a secret this long, it's hard to tell someone."

Suddenly, he had a disturbing thought.

"Did he... did he molest you?" he asked.

"What? No. He didn't do that. Sometimes I almost wish he had. At least then he would have paid attention to me. Mostly he just ignored me. He said I was a bother to him."

"So why did he raise you?"

"Because I knew too much, so he couldn't afford to kick me out. My stepdad was a bad man. A criminal. It's only just that a couple of days ago the law finally caught up with him."

"So then how did you come to live with him?"

"He... well, I guess you could say he kidnapped me."

"He what?" John asked, shocked.

"Not on purpose," she qualified. "He didn't mean to. He was just stealing a car, and didn't realize I was in the back seat until it was too late."

John felt his blood run cold at that revelation. This story was all too familiar.

"He... stole a car?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Yeah. I was only three at the time, so I don't really remember much about it. But once he discovered me, there really wasn't anything he could do. He obviously couldn't take me to the police, and he couldn't take me back home. He was stuck with me."

John's heart pounded in his chest. He knew this story. He had replayed it over and over in his mind, perhaps thousands of times over the past ten years. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. The shock of hearing what she had told him had stolen his voice.

Cassie stared at him, seeing the surprised look on his face. "What is it?" she asked.

John took a few breaths to steady his nerves. Part of him didn't want to know the truth. What would it mean if his suspicions turned out to be true?

Finally he managed to regain some semblance of control over himself. "Cassie," he said, almost in a whisper. "Is that your real name?"

"No," she replied. "It's just the name my stepdad gave me."

"What... what's your real name?" he croaked, feeling warm and feverish in anticipation of her response. He heard the answer in his mind before she gave it, because he already knew what it would be.

"Mary," she said.

THE END

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