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Brendan struggled to stay awake. A tough battle—far tougher than it should have been under the circumstances.

They'd approached him behind a bank, its parking lot empty as evening turned to night. He'd been cutting through to the shelter, hoping it would still have meals. Hot meals would be too much to hope for at that hour, but he'd settle for free.

The bank had erected a fence between itself and the shelter to stem the flow of kids taking the shortcut from the bus stop. Brendan had been halfway up when the woman had hailed him. Fearing trouble, he'd only climbed faster, until she'd laid a hand on his calf and he'd turned to see not cops, but a middle-aged couple—well-dressed professional types.

They'd told him some story about losing their son to the streets and devoting their lives to helping other kids. Bullshit, of course. In real life, everyone wanted something. Despite their sincere smiles and concerned eyes, he'd decided that what they wanted was sex. And, as long as they were willing to pay for it, that was okay with him.

It wouldn't be the first trick he'd turned. He'd briefly teamed up with a kid from the shelter, until Ricky had found a better-looking partner. Brendan should have taken this as a sign. If he

wasn't good-looking enough to be a whore in L.A., he sure as hell wasn't going to make it as a movie star. But it was too late to go home now. Too late to admit he didn't have what it took. Too hard to face everyone who'd told him so.

He did have talent. Won the top role in every school play. Got a job at the summer theater three years running. Did two TV commercials for local businesses. So, at sixteen, tired of his parents telling him to go to college first, he'd taken his savings and come to L.A.

Now the money was gone and he'd found no decent way to earn more, and if this couple wanted what he figured they wanted, that was fine by him. They had kind faces. Maybe in Hollywood that didn't count for shit, but where he'd come from, it meant something.

They'd driven him to their home in Brentwood. He'd recognized the neighborhood from a "Star Tours" bus trip he'd taken when he first arrived. He'd sat in the back of their SUV, peering out the tinted windows into the night, watching the fabled neighborhood pass. They'd pulled into the garage of a modest-looking house, then led him inside. They'd offered food, but he'd claimed he wasn't hungry, despite his rumbling stomach. He might be naive, but he knew better than to accept food or drink.

When they'd taken him downstairs, through a TV room into a guest bedroom, he'd been certain this was where the situation would change. But they'd only turned on the lights, pointed out the adjoining washroom and said they'd see him in the morning. They hadn't even closed the door, but left it ajar, so he wouldn't feel locked in.

Now, as he fought the urge to sleep, footsteps sounded on the stairs. The woman's voice, sharp with an accent. Then the man's. Then another man's. And another . . .

Oh, shit.

Heart hammering, he tried to rouse himself. Why was he so tired? Goddamn it, he had to make a break for it, before he found himself in the middle of a gang bang or—

Outside, in the TV room, the woman offered refreshments. Two of the men asked for wine, the third accepted water. Then their voices settled into one place, as if they were sitting.

Wine and conversation as a prelude to sex games with a teenage boy?

Brendan strained to make out their words. They were talking about books. “Texts” as they called them, tossing around words like belief and ritual, debating the different translated meanings of Hebrew and Latin versions.

Latin. That’s what the woman had been speaking earlier. As he’d been getting into their car, she said been saying something to the man in another language, and with her accent, Brendan had figured she was reverting to her mother tongue to relay a private message. The language, though, had sounded familiar. Now he knew why. As a Christmas and Easter Catholic, he’d heard enough Latin.

Now these people were discussing religious texts, and that couldn’t be a coincidence. The couple had said they wanted to help, as penance for their mistakes with their son. Good Samaritans.

“—too old,” one man was saying, his voice rising enough for Brendan to hear him easily. “All of our success has been with kids much younger, and I don’t understand why we need to change that now.”

“We aren’t changing,” another man said. “We’re expanding and experimenting. There’s a limited supply of younger children out there and it’s difficult getting access to them. If we can adjust the procedure to work successfully with teens, we open the door to limitless possibilities.”

“Don’s right.” The woman again. “One or two a year isn’t enough, not for the scale we . . .”

Her voice dropped soothingly until, once again, Brendan could only catch the odd word.

He couldn’t blame them for setting their sights on children. By his age, most street kids had no interest in “rescue.” They were too immersed in the life to accept help. But he would. Drugs weren’t a problem—he’d never been able to afford them. They could spout all the Bible verses they wanted and he’d smile and agree if it meant getting on a bus home. He could tell his parents he’d hadn’t failed; he’d just had a religious experience and had changed his mind.

He closed his eyes and pictured himself walking up his drive, imagined his mother’s face, his little sister’s squeals, his father’s expression—stern but relieved.

The conversation outside his door seemed to have turned to a heated debate on the nature of suffering. Yeah, he thought with a chuckle, definitely Catholic. From what he could make out, it sounded a hell of a lot like a conversation between two Goths he’d overheard last week.

Morbid. The word popped into his head and he turned it over in his mind. A cool word. Described Goths and some religious types alike—that fixation with death and suffering.

In the room beyond, a male voice had picked up volume again.

“—Romans used crucifixion not only because it was publicly humiliating, but for the degree of suffering inflicted. With the weight of the body pulling down, breathing becomes difficult, and the condemned could hang for days, slowly suffocating.”

“True, but according to accounts of the witch trials, burning was the worst way to die. If you keep the person from dying from smoke inhalation, they can live a surprisingly long time, and suffer unimaginable pain.”

Brendan shivered. Okay, that went beyond morbid. Maybe these weren't mainstream religious do-gooders, but some kind of fanatical sect. Like the Scientologists or something. Most religious people he knew were good folks, but there were wackos. As much as he wanted to go home, he wouldn't put up with any kind of sick shit. He should get up, go in there, maybe tell them he'd changed his mind. But he was so tired.

The voices had stopped. Good. He'd rest for a few more minutes, then sneak out—

The door opened. In walked the man and woman, followed by three others: a younger woman, a balding man and a white-haired one.

"Hello, Brendan," said the woman.

Brendan struggled to his feet. "I want to leave."

The woman nodded. Then she stepped forward, lifted her hand to her mouth and blew. A cloud of white dust flew into Brendan's face. He tried to cough, but only wheezed. She started speaking in Latin again and his knees gave way. The other two men rushed to grab him, each taking an arm, their grips gentle as they helped him to his feet.

The men lifted his arms around their shoulders. His eyelids flagged and closed. His feet dragged across the floor as they took him into a second, smaller room. The men exchanged words, then lowered him to the floor. A cold, hard floor.

He opened his eyes. There, from high above, a dog stared down at him. A terrier, like his sister's dog. But there was something wrong . . .

Legs. It didn't have any legs. Just a torso and a head perched on the edge of an overhang, watching him.

Hallucinating.

Drugged?

He should care—knew he should care—but he couldn't work up the energy. He squeezed his eyes shut and huddled there too weak to even think. He heard them talking and he could tell they were speaking English, but deciphering the meaning of the words required too much energy, so he just listened to the sound and let it lull him.

Liquid splashed onto his back, seeping through his shirt. Cold and wet and stinking of something he should recognize. Then, as he was about to drift off, his wandering brain identified the smell.

Gasoline.

He snapped awake, panicked, telling his arms and legs to move, his mouth to scream, but nothing obeyed. He cracked open his eyes just enough to see the people filing from the room. The woman stopped in front of him and bent. Her smiling lips parted, saying something reassuring. Then she struck the match.