

TWO

TRUCK CONFESSION



GEORGE STOOD IN THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE

homeroom door, listening to the heavy rumble of the ancient heating unit as it powered up, and periodically poking his head in to see if Father Borgia was alone.

It was funny about priests, how they were kind of like minor celebrities, at least in their own communities. They couldn't go anywhere without being swamped by well-wishers, busybodies, complainers, or people with requests. *Like mine*, he thought.

At least he was waiting for everyone to clear out, not standing in line like some crazed fan at a concert. All he wanted was to go to confession. He just wanted to start out on his best foot, spiritually speaking, for what he was about to do.

Finally the last person, Celia, said goodbye, and Father Borgia turned. George moved in quickly, using the excuse of handing the priest his black bag where the holy objects were packed to say, "Excuse me, Father."

But before he could say more than the first syllable, he felt a tap on his own shoulder. It was Mr. Costain.

"How is everything today, George? I was . . . a bit concerned about J.P.'s comments in class."

George wasn't too surprised. Mr. Costain was the closest thing to a dad he'd ever had, and he had a feeling that the man felt bad about the attacks: he'd been out of town the day it happened. Not that Mr. C. could have done anything about it but . . . the problem was, George really didn't want to discuss it right now.

"It's okay. . ." George didn't know what else to say. What was he supposed to say, anyway? He just hoped

Mr. Costain wasn't going to talk to him about turning the other cheek.

Mr. Costain sensed George's discomfort. "Right. I just thought I'd check. Just . . . don't hesitate to come to me if there *is* anything you want to talk about, okay?"

George nodded and tried not to look like he wanted to escape. Normally he wouldn't treat Mr. Costain this way, but there was so much on his mind.

Father Borgia had just disappeared out the door when George remembered what he was supposed to be doing. Panicked, he said goodbye to Mr. Costain and rushed out of the room, nearly bowling over Allie on the way out.

"Hey!" she called after him, but he was already too far away to turn around, and Father was heading for his car. George kicked himself mentally for his clumsiness and prayed that Allie would wait for him to finish confession; in all his worrying about talking to her, he had forgotten to tell her he wanted to talk.

He ran through the snow, jumped over the little hedge surrounding the school lawn, and sprinted across the icy parking lot. He came to a breathless stop next to the junky pickup truck that belonged to the old priest. Father Borgia refused to use parish money to buy a better vehicle, no matter how many people tried to convince him otherwise.

"Oh, hi there, George. Why you runnin' so fast? Did I steal your wallet?" he said.

"No, Fa . . . Father," George panted as he tried to catch his breath, "I wanted to . . . ask you . . . if you had time for a . . . quick confession."

“Well I can see that it’ll be quick, the way you just about killed yourself coming over here. I’ve never seen anyone in such a hurry to do penance. Well, I’d be happy to oblige. Hop on in.”

Father Borgia opened the passenger side for George, who got in and shut the door. It shut with a grinding of metal on metal as the priest settled in the driver’s side. He opened his bag, pulled out a purple stole, unrolled it and hung it around his neck. Then he handed George a crucifix, “to keep your head straight,” he said, and wasted no time making the sign of the cross, staring at George and waiting for him to do the same.

George had never been to confession in a Chevy before, but he felt more at ease than he would have in one of the classrooms at JP2HS. Something about the setting made it seem more like two friends having a chat. Quickly, he made the sign of the cross.

“Well, it’s just that I’ve been having these . . . angry thoughts. Toward this guy I know.”

“Is this that wrestler that pushed you in the closet?”

George couldn’t contain his shock. “How did you find out?” he asked. Had Celia and her family told the whole world?

“Well, you know. It’s a small school. People talk.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” replied George, suspecting J.P.

“Well, just go on with your confession. You said this would be quick, and I’m gettin’ cold. My old bones won’t last long out here.”

George guessed that the priest was just trying to put him at ease. He looked down at the crucifix, and then

stared out the window at the field across the street. Now that he was here, in confession, he didn't really know what to say.

"I guess that's all. I'm still mad at this guy, but I know I can't get back at him. Can I?" he asked, a bit hopeful that perhaps there was a way. There was such a thing as justice, after all.

"No, you can't get back at him. At all," Father Borgia said gruffly. "So don't get your hopes up." He paused. "Look at Him," he said, pointing to the crucifix, "Don't you think a little public humiliation is a small thing compared to a severe beating and a three hour death sentence? I know it's hard to forgive. You have to ask Him for patience, and grace, and to provide for your failings."

There was no way around it, and George knew it. He would just have to suck it up and forget about how he felt. Somehow. *Maybe I could just pretend it never happened, he thought. But Celia and Allie would still know. Allie . . .*

"Father?" George said suddenly.

"Yes, George?"

"There's one other thing I wanted to mention." He swallowed nervously. "There's this girl. Allie."

"Ah, the blond girl at your school?"

"Yeah. We're . . . good friends."

"Maybe a little more than friends?" Father Borgia replied. One eyebrow had gone up.

"Maybe," George admitted. "Actually, I don't know. I think she's . . . well, I bet you know what I think."

"Yeah, I bet I do," Father replied with a smile. "I was-

n't always a priest, you know. And a good priest still recognizes a wonderful girl when he meets her."

George exhaled in relief. Maybe this would be easier than he thought.

"Well, we've known each other for months now, and we've always been friends, but recently we've been talking a lot more, and . . ." He stopped, trying to gather his thoughts.

"And maybe, done a little more than talk?" Father helpfully added.

"Well, sort of. I mean, we kind of started holding hands at the Costain's New Year's Party, and lately I've been thinking about . . . you know. Um . . . uh . . ."

Father Borgia held up his hand with a little chuckle. "OK, chief. Let me stop you right there. I think I know where this is going. You know, it seems like you want this to be less of a confession and more of a permission slip. Well, I couldn't do it with your punk wrestler problem, and I'm not gonna do it now, either."

"Father, I—"

The priest held his hand up again. "Wait, wait. I'm not saying I think you've done anything wrong. Boys think about girls, and vice versa. That's what people do. Believe me, I've heard a lot worse things in confession. Thinking is fine, but remember that our Lord will see every thought in your head. So don't let those thoughts turn into ones you wouldn't want a boy to have about your *own* sister."

Sister. Immediately, George thought of Celia. They weren't related, but she was the closest thing he had to a

sister. He tried to imagine someone thinking about Celia with romantic intentions, and realized he'd *never* thought about her that way.

The idea surprised him, almost as much as the idea of *anyone* thinking of Celia as a girlfriend. It wasn't that she was unattractive. She just didn't seem to be the type . . . she wasn't like Allie.

Still, he tried to consider Celia the way he would a prospective girlfriend. He remembered the thoughts he'd been having recently about Allie, but instead of her he put Celia in the picture. To his relief, there wasn't anything too terrible, as far as he was concerned.

"You know," he said, "maybe I am looking for a kind of permission slip. But not a bad one," he added quickly. "It's just that I think Allie and I might move a bit beyond holding hands soon, and . . . Father, do you think kissing is okay? I mean, between people like me and Allie? People who aren't married?"

Father Borgia sighed. "George, you're not gonna like this answer, but the truth is, I can't tell you."

"Why not?" George was actually a bit relieved that the answer wasn't a straight-out "no."

"Because this is one of those things the Church wisely leaves up to a well-developed conscience. There's no doctrine, no encyclical, no papal sermon on record that has anything to do with when you can kiss your girlfriend. What the rule is that you can't allow yourself to take an action where one result is arousal, unless you're married. That doesn't just mean arousal is the only result, it means it's ANY part of the result."

The priest stopped to let it sink in, then continued, “No matter how much you like this girl, and want her to know that, if kissing her makes you want more, you need to stop. In that case, even a chaste kiss can be too much for some people.”

Once again, George found himself facing an idea he had never considered. This was turning out to be the most enlightening confession of his life. “So how do I know?”

Father laughed. “George, don’t tell me you don’t know when you’re aroused or not?”

George’s face burned with embarrassment. “Of course I can! I just mean, you know, isn’t there some official line you can’t cross or something?”

“Look,” replied the priest, “I can tell you a bunch of stuff you *can’t* do, but I think you already know that stuff. The trick is to avoid being one of those people who lie to themselves. You know the type? They find themselves saying stuff like, ‘Well, this might arouse other people, but not me,’ little lies like that.”

George laughed a little. He could think of a few people that might lie to themselves in that way. *Not me though. I’m not that desperate.*

“So the answer to your question,” Father continued, “is that I can’t tell you whether kissing is or is not okay for you, or for Allie. It’s not necessarily the same for both of you, you know. I can tell you that a kiss can be used as a valid and chaste symbol of one’s affection, perhaps before marriage. As long as it’s not some kind of crazy foreign kind of kissing, if you catch my drift,” he added with a slight smile.

“You mean like Russian kissing?” George said with as much seriousness as he could muster.

Father Borgia looked genuinely confused for a just a second, then realized the joke. He smirked at George, and raised his hand as if to smack him in the head. Instead he just patted him on the shoulder.

“I think you get it, my boy. Let me just end it like this. If you can kiss a beautiful, intelligent, sweet girl for more than a few seconds and *not* get aroused, you should be talking to a doctor and not a priest.”

George laughed out loud; he was in a much better mood now. “Father, thanks.” He reached out to shake the priest’s hand. “You really helped me a lot.”

Instead of taking the offered hand, Father Borgia took the crucifix from George’s other hand. “Not so fast there, guy. Didn’t you forget something? This is a confession after all.”

“Oh . . . uh . . . I’m sorry for these and all my sins.”

“Okay, good. And now you need to make an act of contrition.”

George said his act in a whisper. Father spoke the words of absolution, and said, “For your penance, George, I want you to say a rosary.”

“Okay.”

“With Allie.”

“Oh.”

“Just the two of you.”

At first the idea seemed a bit strange. *But how could I be comfortable kissing a girl, and not comfortable praying with her?*

“I will. Thanks again, Father.” He offered his hand again. This time Father took it. He had a strong grip for an old man; stronger than George’s.

“It looks like we didn’t take too long after all,” Father said, looking out the dirty glass over George’s shoulder.

“Too long for what?”

Father Borgia didn’t reply, but waved at someone standing outside the truck, behind George. He turned to look. It was Allie.

The snow had lessened a bit, but there were still fine, white flakes falling as George and Allie slowly walked hand in hand through the woods near the school.

From when he had first seen Allie out the pick-up truck’s window, George felt an overwhelming sense of fate about the way things were going to turn out. After all, he never planned to talk to Father Borgia about her, but he did. He’d forgotten to ask her to wait for him, yet there she was.

They walked quietly. The path they chose took them through the heart of the forest, past the secluded boulder formation Allie called Chimney Rock. That was where George planned to stop.

He was thinking about what he would say, and enjoying the feeling of holding hands and not feeling weird about it. He liked how Allie didn’t think it was strange either; in fact she had grabbed his hand as soon as they started out. She didn’t even wait until they were out of sight of the school.

“So,” Allie said, “what were you and Father Borgia talking about?”

“I was going to confession.”

“Confession?” she asked, surprised.

“Yep,” he replied.

“In a truck?”

“Uh huh.”

“Is that even allowed?”

George started to laugh, but stopped himself when he realized Allie was serious. It was easy to forget that she wasn't very familiar with how Catholicism worked, even though she'd been a Catholic her whole life. JP2HS had sort of been a crash course for her.

“Sure,” he said, “I don't think there's any rule about where you have to go to confession, as long as it's with a priest. Technically, there could even be other people around, if it's an emergency.”

“Like soldiers in a war, or something?” she asked, catching on quickly as usual.

“Yeah, like that.”

They'd reached the crossroads of the path that would lead them to the SpeedEMart. *This is it*, he thought. *And there's Chimney Rock. Now or never.* Once they were next to the snowy granite formation, he stopped walking, pulling gently on her hand to get her to stop. “Allie?”

She didn't say anything, but turned and looked right at him, right in his eyes.

Suddenly George forgot everything. He'd had it all planned, what to say, what to do, but now, nothing. It was gone. No romantic words, no cool approach. He

panicked, and simply moved closer to her, leaned down to kiss her.

She turned away. "George, I don't think I'm ready for this yet."

He froze, and a strong sinking feeling overtook him. It was like his entire upper body melted and dripped into his feet. It was a terrible sensation. He had been wrong. It was overpowering, and . . .

"Okay. I'm ready now."

George looked at Allie, saw the playful, almost joking smile on her face, and this time he couldn't stop himself from kissing her.

They parted after a little while, and Allie said with a faint smile, "It took you long enough."

George smiled back. "Well, now we can make up for lost time," he said, and moved to kiss her again, when he stopped suddenly. He'd heard a noise from somewhere, small but definite. He pulled back, tensed, and looked in every direction, trying to hear the sound again.

Allie saw the look on his face. "What? You're not tricking me, are you?" she said with a sly smile.

George shook his head no, and tried to peer deeper into the gathering dark.

Allie started to look around too, nervous, and a bit frightened. Twilight was coming on fast; it was harder to see through the trees than it had been just a few minutes before. "George, what is it?"

He heard the worry in her voice.

"Probably nothing; I . . . just heard a sound, that's all." He tried hard to relax, but it wasn't working. He could

definitely make something out now, something low and steady. It sounded like breathing.

George had always had a good sense for his surroundings; it was what helped him to anticipate his opponent on the wrestling mat, or to know where the animal was on a hunt. This was no animal. Animals didn't breathe like that.

There was a rustle from the dusky forest to his right. It was ever so slight, but George's ears caught it. He pretended not to notice, his mind racing to form a plan of action. They were at least a minute's run from the school, probably more through the woods, in the snow, in the dark. He could outrun whoever it was, but Allie—

"Everything's fine," he said out loud, then whispered to Allie, "*When I move, run!*"

He took a step, made as if to take her hand. "GO!" he hissed in her ear, and whipped around in a low crouch, ready for anything. Allie, to her credit, took off toward the school without hesitation.

He knew he needed to buy Allie some time before he could make his escape, but the sound of her tearing through the woods was gone, and there was no sound of pursuit. Maybe there really wasn't anybody there. Or maybe it wasn't Allie he was after.

George's heart was pounding with fear and adrenaline as he slowly, silently approached an old, hollowed-out tree near the frozen stream a few yards from the Rock.

Suddenly the surrounding forest was alive with sound and movement. He'd caught something by surprise; whatever it was jerked back from the tree, causing clumps

of snow to drop from the overhead branches. They landed on George's head, cold and sudden, startling and blinding him for a moment. Out of reflex, he raised his hands to ward off any blows and quickly shook away the snow.

He heard a cracking sound, and a scraping, and saw a person wearing a black trench coat stumble across the ice to the opposite bank—*James?*

No. *Maybe.*

He wasn't sure. But whoever it was took off into the woods, glancing back as he ran. In the waning moonlight, George caught a glimpse of a face, perhaps looking back to see if anyone was following. It was a frightened face, distorted with surprise and anger, only turned toward him for a moment.

But that moment was long enough for him to recognize the menacing glare of Tyler Getz.