

Though The Heavens Should Fall

By Scribblesinink

"I'm betting...." Mimi cocked her head and looked at Jake appraisingly. "Captain of the football team. Prom king. Most likely to succeed." She quirked an eyebrow. "Am I right?"

Jimmy chuckled. "Don't quit your day job."

"Why?" Mimi peered around at the others who'd gathered in Bailey's. "What am I missing here?"

Jimmy and Stanley exchanged another look with Eric, before Stanley leaned forward. "I think he beat up the prom king."

"Oh, yeah." Jake straightened up slowly, mouth quirked. "I did."

Jake sounded as if he'd completely forgotten about it, and only Stanley's reminder made him dredge it up. But for Jimmy.... Truth was, Jimmy *had* managed to push it to the deep recesses of his mind for the most part. But the other day, locked in that trunk with Bill, those old fears had come back. And now Stanley's words brought back the memories like it had happened yesterday.

The conversation rambled on around him, but Jimmy didn't really pay much attention to what was being said. He didn't notice the awkward moment of silence before Eric left the group to get their coffees from Mary, or how the talk between Jake, Stanley and Mimi wandered back into less personal territory; instead, he was transported back to events fourteen years ago.

Jimmy had always been chubby, both as a toddler and a teenager. And he knew he wasn't a quick thinker. He wasn't dumb, per se; he simply liked to think things through thoroughly, study them from all angles, before deciding on a course of action. In fact, it was what made him and Bill such a good team: whereas Bill could be rash, Jimmy would pause to consider. But not everyone appreciated that, and in fifth grade, he'd gotten held back, so he ended up in the same year with Jake and Bill and Stanley. And Jeff Bergholz....

While Jake and his friends mostly left Jimmy in peace, their interaction not stretching beyond a few congenial words if they happened to end up in line together in the cafeteria, the same couldn't be said for Bergholz and his minions. Bergholz had it all: handsome, popular, good at sports—though rivaled on the football field by Stanley Richmond, even if they didn't compete for the same position—and he'd made Jimmy a target for ridicule from the first. He and the group around him would 'accidentally' bump into Jimmy in the

cafeteria or in the hallways, or sing "Jimmy Jumbo is a dumbo!" every time they saw him and the teachers weren't around to hear.

Jimmy's dad told him to ignore them, and that was what he'd tried, but over the years the taunting had gone from bad to worse. By the time Jimmy was seventeen, his mom had left and the words *faggot* and *queer* had entered his tormentors' vocabulary. His father seemed afraid they might be right—he started leaving copies of *Penthouse* and later *Hustler* lying around the house in places where Jimmy was bound to find them. That lasted for several years, until Jimmy brought home Margaret Hopkins: his dad relaxed a little, and the random magazines disappeared.

At long last, they all reached senior year: Stanley Richmond scored the touchdown that earned him a scholarship, and Jimmy's final grades ended up being average, which was neither good nor bad. While Jimmy was looking forward to the escape that graduation would provide, the rest of the school was abuzz with the coming prom. Emotions ran high and wild gossip flew around: who'd be going with whom, and where the other girls had gotten their dresses, and who'd be elected prom king and queen.... Jimmy let the excitement slide past him—who was he gonna ask, anyway?—while Jeff Bergholz strutted around as if he'd already won the election. To be honest, Jimmy wouldn't be surprised if he had—especially as he suspected bribes were involved.

Jimmy planned to spend the evening of the prom at home, alone, while his dad worked the night shift at the mine. But about three days before the big night, Bill—with whom Jimmy had struck up a friendship over a science project in their junior year—told him he should come along: "There's a bunch of us going, it'll be fun!"

Jimmy hadn't wanted to go, not really. School events were not his thing; they made him feel even more clumsy and awkward than usual. But once Bill got something in his head, he could be as persistent as a dog with a bone, and somehow—Jimmy never quite figured out how exactly—he convinced Jimmy to agree. So, on the evening of the prom, much to his own surprise, he donned his dad's old wedding suit. The tuxedo fit reasonably well, if you ignored the fact that the pants legs were a half inch too short, and the shoulders a tad too narrow, so he couldn't quite button the jacket up properly. He had just finished getting dressed when Bill and his girlfriend Jenny arrived to give him a ride.

They hooked up with the rest of the clique at the Pizza Garden: Jake, who was with Emily of course—they'd been together on and off since sixth grade—and Stanley's date was Patty Peck, a girl who usually hung out with Bergholz, and the other cheerleaders. Jimmy reckoned Stanley going to KU to play football had something to do with Patty's sudden interest in him, although he didn't quite understand why Stanley would want to hang out with her; in Jimmy's opinion, she was a bit of a vapor head, and he'd always considered Stanley a little smarter than that. On the other hand, she did have very nice

breasts, he thought to himself, glancing at her smooth red dress for a moment. He blushed when the scowl she shot him told him she'd caught his look, and gave her a little shrug in apology; he hadn't meant to be rude—but she sniffed and turned up her nose, and Jimmy put it from his mind.

They shared a few pizzas between them, though Jimmy was careful to eat no more than two slices. He feared the usual criticism—yeah, so, he was a bit overweight. That didn't mean he shouldn't eat, right? When it was time to head for the school, they trooped out of the Pizza Garden and into a couple of cars. Somehow, Jimmy ended up stashed in the back of Jake's Roadrunner, a tight enough fit to make him slightly uncomfortable.

After he'd gotten himself settled in the back, Emily pushed the front seat into place. She slipped in, snuggling up against Jake while the engine roared to life. The car vibrated around Jimmy.

Jake glanced at Jimmy in the rear view mirror. "So, how come you don't have a date?" Startled, Jimmy met Jake's gaze. It was the question he'd dreaded, but he saw only honest curiosity on Jake's face.

He shrugged, feeling his face heat up. "I, um...."

Before Jimmy could think of any excuse that wouldn't make him a laughing stock, Jake steered the car into a curve. He was going a little faster than he should, and Jimmy had to grab on to the seat in front of him.

"Oh, come on, Jake!" Emily laughed as the car straightened again, and punched Jake lightly in the shoulder. "Leave him alone."

"No, I'm serious." Jake shifted gears, and the car jumped forward. He used the mirror again to seek out Jimmy's gaze. "You've been making eyes at Maggie Hopkins all year. I thought you'd ask her?"

Jimmy peered down at his lap. There was a small grease spot on his left knee, and he rubbed at it in vain. It was true; he'd found himself looking at Margaret more and more, even fantasizing about her, but he'd thought he'd been very careful to make sure nobody would notice. And ask her to the prom? Him, tubby Jimmy Taylor, and Margaret Hopkins? He'd never dare. She was such a pretty girl, even though she was quiet and a little shy, and she'd laugh in his face for sure if he did.

"Um...." he stammered for a second time, trying to find the words. "I don't think—."

"Right." Jake gave a small laugh and shook his head. "Jimmy, how will you ever know, if

you never give it a shot?"

Jimmy had shrugged inside his father's jacket, and hadn't replied. It had taken almost three years, and after he'd made Deputy, that he finally gathered up enough courage to follow Jake's advice and ask Margaret out. Jimmy quickly discovered Jake had been right: he hadn't known, until he'd asked her—and she said yes.

That was all in the future, though, when Jake pulled into the school parking lot, the building ablaze in light and color and music. Jimmy didn't dance, but he enjoyed watching his classmates: the girls in their pretty dresses; most of the boys apparently as awkward in their tuxedos as he felt; everyone laughing and smiling. The band was good, and he very much liked the punch they were serving too. However, soon after they'd arrived, he found himself alone, leaning against a wall. Stanley joined him for a short time, grumbling under his breath about his date ditching him for some jock. But Stanley, tall and handsome, soon found himself another lady friend to dance with, and Jimmy was left to his own company again.

He was just considering whether to get another glass of the punch—it really was quite tasty—when Patty reappeared at his shoulder. "Oh, thank God I found you, Jimmy!" He blinked at her, startled into speechlessness. "Come quick!" She tugged at the sleeve of his jacket.

"Wh—what is it?" Jimmy stammered, once he'd managed to find his voice.

"It's Stanley." Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes concerned.

Jimmy furrowed his brow, trying to process what she told him. "Stanley? He said that you dumped him...?"

"No, no." Patty shook her head, and a few carefully coiffed loose curls danced about her face. "Come on." She tugged again, harder this time.

Jimmy glanced around a little desperately. He was hoping to spot Jake or Bill somewhere—they'd be so much better at dealing with whatever was going on with Stanley—but he didn't see them anywhere in the crowd. With a resigned sigh, he allowed Patty to drag him out the main room. She led him up to the second floor and preceded him into a quiet, dark hallway, the only light coming through the glass fire doors from the stairwell. Somewhere from the shadows came a soft noise. It sounded like the scuff of feet, and Jimmy thought he detected a muffled "Shh!" He squinted into the gloom, but saw no one, and he peered down at Patty.

"Where's Stanley?"

"In there!" She pointed to a door, and Jimmy pulled it open. It was dark in the space behind it, and some instinct told him something wasn't right.

He hesitated. "Stanley?"

"Course not, you doofus." Patty giggled.

Next thing he knew, quick footfalls skittered up behind them. Jimmy started to turn, but before he'd made it fully round, something—or someone—shoved him, hard. He stumbled forward into the dark, tripping over his own feet. He didn't get far: before he'd taken two paces in a bid to keep his balance, he smacked his shoulder against the back wall, and something clattered over with a loud noise. He realized he was in a closet, and it smelled of cleaning fluids and soap. Then the door was slammed shut behind him, and inky blackness dropped over him.

"H—Hello?" Jimmy inched his way back to where he'd come from, finding the door firmly locked against his attempts to push it open. "Please, let me out?"

Already, he could feel the panic rising: the narrow walls were closing in on him slowly and inexorably, the invisible ceiling squeezing the air from his lungs. "Please?"

He hated the note of begging that had crept into his voice, the naked fear; whoever was on the other side of the door must've picked up on it too, because a burst of laughter drifted through the wood. "Enjoy your prom, Fatty-boy."

There was more laughter as several sets of footsteps faded down the hallway, the sound of voices growing dim.

"Please?" Jimmy whispered a third time into the darkness, but nobody answered.

He sank to his knees, leaning his forehead against the door, and struggled to keep his breathing under control. Tears were streaming down his face. How had they ever found out that it was his worst nightmare, getting locked in a tight, dark space? He'd discovered the phobia himself when he was still a kid. His dad had taken him into the mine one day, and Jimmy had been terrified, convinced the rock would crush them to death. He'd never felt such relief as when his father had carried him back outside, into the warm light of the sun. At nineteen, he was old enough to know the terror was irrational, but that didn't make it any less real.

God, if only he had been smart enough not to listen to Bill. If only he'd stayed home, the way he'd planned, then none of this would've happened. He'd have been safe, watching

COPS reruns and munching popcorn. Who gave a damn about his prom, anyway?

"Help, somebody?" The cry sounded squeakily thin in his own ears, but he couldn't gather up enough strength for anything louder.

The distant thumping of a heavy bass traveling through the concrete walls was his only reply.

After what felt like an eternity to Jimmy (though in reality, he later realized, it couldn't have been more than twenty minutes) he heard muted voices again. He froze in alarm, afraid his tormentors had come back for more fun—or that his mind was playing tricks on him, just as it did when it made him believe the walls were growing tighter.

"We really shouldn't be here, you know?" Jake's voice held little conviction; it was filled with amusement instead.

"I know." There was a girl's giggle, and over his own ragged breathing, Jimmy recognized Emily. "Isn't that part of the fun?"

They were coming closer while they were talking. Stiffly, Jimmy struggled back to his feet, smacking his closed fists against the door. "Help!" His voice was raw. "Let me out!"

Stunned silence fell on the other side of the door, and for the length of a heartbeat, Jimmy feared his imagination had fooled him after all.

Then: "Jimmy?"

"Oh, thank you, God," Jimmy sobbed. "Yeah, in here!" He banged on the door some more. He was crying again, this time with relief, but he didn't really care. Something clicked and then wonderful light fell in through a widening crack as the door was pulled open.

As soon as the door started to open, Jimmy shoved against it, nearly bowling Emily over in his haste to get out of the tiny closet. He fell to his hands and knees, not caring about what the hard tiles might do to his dad's suit, and drew in shuddering gulps of chalk-filled school air, thinking he'd never tasted anything so sweet.

"Jimmy? What happened? How the heck did you get locked up in the closet?"

Jimmy shook his head from side to side; he couldn't spare the breath to answer Emily's puzzled questions. Then Jake crouched in front of him. He grabbed Jimmy's shoulders, shaking him lightly until Jimmy lifted his head to look at him. Jake's face swam in Jimmy's teary vision, and he blinked rapidly to clear it.

"Are you okay?" A frown creased Jake's brow. "How'd you get in there?"

"Patty... Jeff Bergholz... locked me up...." Jimmy drew in another gulp of air. "Claus... claustro...."

"You're claustrophobic?" Jake let go of Jimmy.

Jimmy nodded, grateful he no longer needed to speak. He sat back and wrapped his arms around himself. Now that the worst was over and the adrenaline was slowly seeping away, he'd started shivering.

"And Bergholz locked you in there?" Jake was still kneeling in front of Jimmy, his face hard.

Another nod. Jimmy scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands, willing himself to stop crying.

"Did he know that?" Emily asked softly. "That you're afraid in small spaces?"

Jimmy thought back. There'd been something quite deliberate about the way Patty had lured him up to the second floor, and the way Jeff had shoved him into the closet. "I... I think so."

"That damned bastard!" Jake swore. "Enough is enough." He pushed back to his feet and jogged off, calling over his shoulder at Emily, "Look after Jimmy."

"Jake?" Emily took a step in the direction Jake had rushed off in. "Where are you going?" But Jake had already turned the corner and disappeared from view. Emily looked back at Jimmy, who shrugged and slowly climbed back to his feet.

Two days later, it had been Bill who'd told Jimmy what had happened next: Jake had shoved his way through the crowd to where Jeff was admiring his new 'crown', and he'd decked the prom king with a single uppercut, never speaking a word. Naturally, Jeff's lackeys had jumped in, and a general scuffle had broken out, the fight putting a premature end to the senior prom of 1992.

"You should've seen it, Jimmy!" Bill had snickered when he told Jimmy the tale. Bill was sporting a black eye and a split lip but seemed proud of the injuries. Jimmy had shaken his head in dismay: he disliked violence, and felt embarrassed at the fight having been over *him*. Even if nobody seemed to know that.

But that wasn't the worst of it: Bill had gone on to explain that Sheriff Dawes had carted Jake off to the local jail, and that his dad, Mayor Green, had let him stew there until late afternoon the following day. For weeks after, Jimmy tried to avoid Jake, fearing he'd hold that against Jimmy. But Jake never mentioned the incident with the broom closet again, except that when he cut the ropes to free Bill and Jimmy from the patrol car's trunk, he'd asked Jimmy if he was all right, holding his gaze until Jimmy managed a shaky nod of the head: *yes, I'm okay*.

Judging by the short pause before Jake answered Stanley's question, it appeared as if he'd forgotten how he'd found out Jimmy was claustrophobic or the fight itself. Well, Jimmy thought to himself, turning to see how Mary was getting on with the coffees-to-go, *he* sure had never forgotten, and he'd—.

Then the jukebox started up, the unexpected music deafeningly loud after hours of silence, and the phones began to ring like crazy. The sudden racket shoved any reminiscences about high school or his fear of small, dark places straight out of Jimmy's head: these were far more urgent fears to attend to. At least until the next time he ended up in a tight space with no way out....

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