

They took him as he came out of one of the toilet cubicles, pinning his arms from behind and shoving his face hard against the wall. The boy felt slivers of peeling paint prickle against his cheek as one of his attackers searched him. He gasped when a sweaty hand found his genitals and lingered there, massaging his penis. Feeling his body's involuntary response, the blood rushed shamefully to his face.

'What do you want?' he asked, trying to ignore the pounding in his groin.

He could hear the panting breath close to his ear and shuddered.

'Ooh, you like that, do you?' came a sticky whisper.

'Maybe we should give him a poke,' the one holding him said.

'I'd like that,' said the boy, huskily, 'let me go and we'll lock the door.'

The two of them, hardly believing their luck, released him. One scurried to the door while the other fumbled with his belt, intending to be first in line. With all his strength, the boy kicked him between his legs. As the kid, hardly able to draw breath, dropped to the floor gulping with agony, the boy reached into his bag and pulled out a thin bladed knife. It turned easily in his hand. Joey's hidden box had produced more than cash and the boy had made time to practice. As he advanced towards door, he watched a growing patch of urine stain the kid's pants.

'This won't hurt too much,' he said.

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'What about him?' Jilly asked, trying to peer unobtrusively across the hall.

'Have a look at his book cover Jilly.

'He's too young for that,' Jilly said, thoughtfully. 'All the symbolism and metaphorical shit in that thing's way over his head. It's not a read for the faint hearted.'

Brett laughed.

'It was too much for me,' he said, 'I never finished it. But there's only one way to find out.'

That evening the couple found the boy reading in the institute's sparse library. They'd watched him throughout the remainder of the meal, noting his indifference to the chaos and his polite almost old-fashioned way of eating. When the level of noise fell sufficiently, they saw him chatting to some of the lads around him, paying particular attention to an unfortunate older child wearing a bandage over one ear.

'Enjoying your book, young fella?' Brett said, as they entered the room.

The boy looked up and smiled so delightfully that Jilly felt her throat constrict. He had beautiful eyes.

'Yes sir,' he replied, nodding at Jilly. 'I have to read this one quite slowly—there's a lot to it.'

'Too right there is,' Brett admitted, sitting on one of the overstuffed armchairs.

Jilly sat next to him.

'What else are you reading?' she asked.

The boy thought for a moment.

'I've got a lot on the list my Mom made me before she died. But she told me to read fun things as well as serious stuff. I'd like to try *The Hobbit*, I think.'

'Whoa,' Brett said, 'that's pretty heavy too. You'll be reading *War and Peace* next.'

The boy laughed. Jilly thought it was a pleasant sound.

'I tried that, sir, maybe again next year.'

He turned and smiled at Jilly.

‘What do you think I should read ma’am?’

She smiled, remembering her own mother’s advice. She was strictly Jane Austen and would have been appalled at her only daughter’s choice of after-hours reading. It was a time of feisty slave novels that kicked D.H. Lawrence into the minor leagues for racy sex. She thought to mention one of her present favorites, Stephen King’s, *The Stand*, and then thought better of it.’

‘I might have to do some research for you there,’ she said, grinning, ‘some of my choices might be considered too strong for these walls.’

‘Some of yours would be,’ Brett agreed, chuckling. ‘How about we get together on the weekend and talk it over. I’ll ask the chief if you can stay over Saturday night if you like.’

11.

Book burning

Two hours after his wife slammed the door on him, Zack jerked his head out of a doze and looked morosely around his study. Not a thing had changed. She'd planned it well. There was nothing in reach that could help him get out of this.

Zack thought he would feel marginally better. The torn flesh on his wrist still stung but that wasn't the cause of his despair. Frowning, he looked at the time on his laptop. Even as angry and determined as she was, she should have been back by now. He'd slept fitfully, jumping when he thought he heard Kristin's car coming back down the drive. At one time, he dreamed of sirens.

He'd done as she'd asked. The letters were drafted and ready to be copied and pasted into emails. After he'd calmed down, he'd seen little point in holding out. Ducking out of the contract had crossed his mind a number of times, and for no better reason than the fact that he just couldn't do it. Giving some of that huge advance back would cost them a shitload of money but he no longer cared. They had everything they wanted in material terms and none of it mattered to him any longer. After downsizing from this sprawling bloody mansion, whatever dough they made on the sale would keep him in whiskey for a goodly while. And drinking himself to death seemed like a reasonably interesting project.

Zack felt no relief that someone had come up with an excuse for him, however absurd, to abandon that third book. But that someone, his wife, had really lost it hadn't she? Who else but a person having an extreme hissy would handcuff her husband to his desk to make their point? At the same time, it occurred to him that some of Kristen's wild points did make an obscure kind of sense. His gloomy thoughts kept coming round to the brutal facts she'd thrown at him earlier.

Zack's hand automatically moved to answer the phone before he realized that Kristen had moved it onto the sideboard out of his reach. He had to let it ring until it went to voice mail. What he then heard changed everything.

'Ah,' the voice said, 'Mr Corsfield. This is Sergeant Bullen of Rose Bay police station. We, er, we'd like to talk to you urgently, sir. There's been an accident regarding your wife. Quite serious I'm afraid. If you can call me on ...'

Zack mechanically recorded the number on his old-fashioned blotter. The idiot, as if he *could* call back. His mind dropped into a swift spiral of panic. How the hell was he going to get free now? Why didn't cops come round with news like this the way they used to? They could undo the cuffs—have a laugh at the same time. Shit, she'd probably been hooning in that overpowered Beemer of hers and bowled someone. This time they'd throw away her license. She'd better get home today or he'd be crapping his pants. What if she didn't? What if she'd pranged the car and put herself in hospital for a few days. They hadn't replaced the cleaner, due in the day after tomorrow. In fact he hadn't even told Kristen that the second cleaner this month had walked out in disgust after he'd thrown up in the hall again. Fucking cops. Fucking cleaners. Fucking, fucking wives.