

CHAPTER 1

Parry was a long time waiting outside the headmaster's office. The school hadn't been able to reach his parents. They were in Stockholm to receive the inaugural Nobel Prize for Services to the Family, so a call had been made to Social Services instead.

The duty officer was going to be notified, and they would be sending someone to support Parry as soon as was possible. They helpfully added, "But don't hold your breath."

The police, however, had arrived promptly. It wasn't as if it was their first visit.

Parry sat opposite the policewoman.

Try as he might, he just couldn't get a decent fantasy going. She was not unattractive, stern looking, but not unattractive. She was wearing the uniform, and those black tights might have been stockings.

Her hair was tied back, ideal for those classic scenes where the female authority figure shakes loose her hair and becomes a teenage male's favourite fantasy figure, the experienced, beautiful and wanton woman.

She was even carrying handcuffs, so there was the whole bondage thing to explore. But still Parry just couldn't get his fantasy motivated.

Facing expulsion didn't help.

Nor did possible serious assault charges. Maybe, sexual assault charges.

He was still only fifteen. He might be put back into care.

Worse still, they might send him back to his foster parents. This is just the sort of thing they'd want to talk about for ages and ages and ages.

Parry thought about his options. He kind of hoped that the young offenders' institutions wouldn't be too full to take him.

It was the policeman, Constable Rodgers, who opened the headmaster's office door. He gently pushed Mike, the last of the witnesses to be informally interviewed, through the outer office where Parry sat, towards the corridor exit.

As he passed Parry, Mike grimaced and gave him a thumbs-down sign. To Parry's quietly mouthed 'piss-off', Mike mimed laughter and gave him a thumbs-up sign.

The policemen nodded at WPC Chapman. She stood and they both looked at Parry.

"Well lad, I think you'd better come in then," announced PC Rodgers.

Parry, prompted by WPC Chapman's hand on his shoulder, followed PC Rodgers into the office.

Dr Wendell, the headmaster, was looking curiously ill at ease. In the eight years he had been running the Ebbsfleet Community Comprehensive School, his short dark hair and dark complexion had both seemed to grey, though very little ever seemed to surprise him.

But right now, if Parry wasn't mistaken, the headmaster seemed a little rattled.

Miss Nicholls was there of course. She was wrapped in a raincoat and holding a mug of presumably sweet tea as if her life depended upon it. She looked both distressed and upset, quite the victim. She was supported by Miss Patterson, the sports teacher and, it had turned out, union rep. This rather explained the irritated science teacher, Mr Bradley, who had been kicking up and down the corridor like a spoilt child. For once he'd have nothing to do but go home early to his wife.

Constable Rodgers sat himself back down in the chair he had obviously been occupying for a while. He was close enough to the headmaster's large desk to rest his notebook on it as he wrote, and by his elbow an empty china teacup – alongside a few biscuit crumbs on the saucer and on the desk – testified to the traditional school office hospitality.

WPC Chapman manoeuvred Parry in front of the desk where both Dr Wendell and PC Rodgers could clearly see him. Parry pretty much had his back to his accuser, and WPC Chapman

stood, probably deliberately, behind him and in front of Miss Nicholls.

“Now Parry,” began Dr Wendell, “I don’t want you to worry about the presence of these police officers. Constables Chapman and Rodgers are here responding to the alarm call. They are just sitting in, at my invitation, to understand the circumstances of the alarm. This isn’t a police investigation, *at this stage.*”

Parry clearly heard a snort from behind him.

“So son, in your own words, tell me what happened in detention this evening,” instructed the headmaster.

“Dunno,” stated Parry, looking at his shoes.

“Now come on man, we’ve heard from Sandra – Miss Nicholls,” the headmaster corrected himself, “and we’ve heard from your schoolmates. Now I think it’s time we heard from you.”

“Dunno,” restated Parry.

“You don’t know what happened, or you don’t know what to say?”

“Dunno.”

“You don’t know what, Parry?”

“Dunno.”

“What don’t you know, Parry?”

“What you just said.”

Parry could almost hear the headmaster mentally counting to ten. Constable Rodgers snapped the lead of his clutch pencil, and was irritably clicking out another length.

The headmaster decided to try again. “What happened between you and Miss Nicholls?”

Parry thought about this for a moment. Feeling that a ‘dunno’ was probably not going to cut it this time, he fell back on a version of the truth.

“I never touched her.”

“But you saw what happened?”

“Sort of.”

“You were involved in what happened?”

“To Miss?”

“Yes, to Miss Nicholls. What did you do?”

“In detention?”

“Yes, in detention, tonight, between you and Miss Nicholls.”

“Just now?”

“Yes.”

“In detention?”

“Yes.”

“Miss Nicholls?”

“Yes.”

“Dunno sir. I never touched her, sir.”

Dr Wendell started his silent counting again. The invitation to join the University of London as a full-time professor had sat quietly in his top drawer for a couple of days now. This evening had helped him to decide that he would much rather be discussing the theory of education than be involved in its grassroots practice.

Constable Rodgers drew thoughtful doodles on his notepad. He was a man of forty-eight years that felt like seventy. He was beginning to yearn for things to be relatively straightforward.

A person makes an accusation.

The accused makes a denial.

Statements are taken.

In general, the likeliest sounding story tends to be given credence. A warning given, or charges filed.

But that wasn't the story today.

Today, a teacher accuses a pupil of assault, but describes the incident as if the kid had never left his desk. The accused's most insightful statement so far had been 'I never touched her' – and the witnesses...

The constable thumbed through his notes.

Two lads heard and saw nothing. But that's not too unusual.

One girl claimed she saw everything, and swore blind that Parry attacked the teacher, but still places about half a football pitch between them during the alleged assault.

And then the accused's amigo swore blind that the teacher in question had a, quote, mental fit, unquote, and threw herself around the room as if possessed. He then recommended they call the Vatican to arrange an exorcism.

And they say television doesn't damage their minds.

Officer Rodgers supposed that Miss Nicholls might be suffering from stress.

He'd seen it often enough in the force. When decent people have to deal with scum all day, it can take its toll.

Perhaps ripping her clothes off in front of her class was this teacher's version of popping down to the cells and giving some luckless drunk a good kicking. A sign that some generous gardening leave is long overdue.

But how to deal with it, that was the problem.

There was a time, he remembered, when they'd take the kid down the station and scare the devil out of him. Maybe rough him up a bit.

Even if he wasn't exactly guilty of this current crime, he'd more than likely already have gone unpunished for several more serious ones. Taught them a little respect for their fellow man it did, being slapped around in the cells for a bit.

'If we treat yer like this when yer innocent,' we used to tell 'em, 'think how much worse it will be for yer if we ever catch yer guilty.'

Still, you couldn't do that anymore.

That was progress for you, the Constable thought bitterly.

Now the officer's biggest problem was extricating himself from the situation without having to write a report that had Miss Nicholls' name and the word 'nutter' in the same sentence.

The office door flew open.

"Coo-ee, I'm not too late am I? You're all so *quiet* in here, I thought you might have all gone home."

The newcomer sucked his bottom lip for a moment as he appraised the decor of the room. "Hate what you've done with this place, but still, each to their own I suppose."

It took a few moments for the assembly in the office to react to him. His white suit alone had a similar effect to the flash of a stun grenade tossed into the room.

Then he'd started talking.

Talking as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be there, and for them to be treated to his opinions. The newcomer's attention was drawn to the trophy cabinet.

“Oh, isn’t this lovely,” he said brightly, peering into the display case and flicking some dust off it with a peach hanky. “A concerto in Perspex and gilded plastic. Adds a little bit of kitsch to the room, don’t you think? God knows it needs it.”

Belatedly, the stranger seemed to notice everyone was staring at him.

“Oh don’t mind me, I’ve come to collect...” – he wrinkled his nose when he first looked straight at Parry – “...him. You just carry on. I’ll just take him when you’ve finished.”

“Oh,” said the headmaster, grabbing the only explanation that seemed reasonable to him, “you must be from Social Services.”

“Yeeesss,” said the newcomer, his finger on his chin as if he were considering the possibility, “you could say that. Oh my, that *poor* plant!”

The man in the white suit nipped around the back of the headmaster’s desk, and began a sympathetic examination of a neglected pot plant.

“Mister, er, er?” fished the headmaster.

“Call me Gordon,” said the man in the white suit, clearly pained by the state of the foliage. “Everybody does. You know, these need more light than this.” Gordon pulled the plant away from the wall and adjusted the headmaster’s curtains.

“And this is *so dry*,” Gordon continued. “You know,” he said, addressing the headmaster sternly, “you must never let it dry out like this.”

Gordon plucked a teapot from a side table, checked the contents and, satisfied that it wasn’t too hot, tipped the remaining tea onto the poorly plant.

“Ooh, teabags,” said Gordon reproachfully. “They may be terribly convenient, but I find they’re never the same, don’t you?”

It was PC Rodgers who saved Dr Wendell from the awkward silence. “Are you willing to take custody of the lad, until such time as his parents can take responsibility, while we investigate the complaint made against him?”

“Of course,” Gordon was back to his effervescent self. “I’d be delighted to look after the boy for you. It is, after all, why I’m here.”

“Secure custody?” spat Miss Nicholls, barely able to contain her hatred.

“Oh yes dear, quite secure,” Gordon seemed pleased himself. “I can quite honestly say I don’t think he will be troubling you again.”

Gordon began to steer Parry towards the door. Parry’s shoulders automatically retracted from Gordon’s hands, so much so that Gordon was able to guide him from the room without laying a finger on him.

WPC Chapman, seeing her charge being spirited away, had the presence of mind to say; “We’ll need contact details, accommodation address, release forms signed...”

“Let’s get that all done in the morning, shall we?” replied Gordon in a conversational manner. “I expect we’ve all had quite enough for one day, and there’s still so much to do to get this one settled for the evening.”

Chapman looked to Constable Rodgers for guidance. He just shrugged as if to say he couldn’t be bothered, one way or the other. He just wanted the problem to go away.

“Toodle-pip,” Gordon waved cheerio, “and *do* look after that plant properly,” he said, addressing the headmaster. “I’ll send you some plant food to perk it up a little.”

The headmaster caught himself returning Gordon’s wave as the door closed. He would have been more embarrassed, but he saw he wasn’t the only one.



The two police officers returned to their patrol car.

A busy-looking woman caught sight of them from a distance, and began advancing on them, frantically waving one arm in the air to attract their attention.

The constables paused by the car, Rodgers leaning on it as they waited for the woman to reach them.

“I suppose she’ll be all right, that teacher,” offered Constable Rodgers by way of conversation.

“I know she bloody well will be,” replied WPC Chapman, her forthright tone taking Rodgers entirely by surprise. “I don’t

think she gave me a second look, but I recognised her right off from sixth-form college. She couldn't keep her clothes on then, the brassy tart. I reckon she's just got more than she bargained for with today's audience."

Rodgers raised an eyebrow, but wasn't able to pursue the matter further before the busy woman arrived.

She only stopped shaking her arm in the air when she was within fifteen paces of them. She fumbled inside her jacket for a moment before finding a photo identity card to brandish at the officers.

"Mrs Williams," she introduced herself. "From Ebbsfleet Social Services. I understand you've got the Hotter boy here for me?"



Parry had been expecting to be taken to the car park, but instead Gordon was marching him in the direction of town. This suited Parry, who imagined Gordon must have left his car on the road somewhere, because clear of the school it would be easier to make his getaway.

"Well thanks for everything," said Parry, "see you around sometime."

Parry nipped between two parked cars and sprinted across the road. He ran a little further up the street to the first side turning where he settled into a jog. As he reached the junction at the end of the short road he glanced back over his shoulder.

He wasn't even being followed.

Not being the world's fittest teenager, he was glad to drop back to a walk. He rounded the corner at the end of the road and relaxed a little more. His foster-parents would be back in a few days, and he had until then to come up with a really good story...

"I do so like to see young people take exercise, but I do think there's a time and a place, don't you?" Gordon stood leaning against a lamppost, folding up the newspaper he'd been reading and looking for all the world as though he had been waiting there all day.

Parry belted across the road, running so fast that he nearly missed the alley he was looking for. He shot down the alley that separated two pairs of semi-detached houses, running the length of the homes and then their gardens, before very nearly vaulting the pedestrian gate at the end of the alley.

Parry picked himself up and started jogging across the green open space. If Gordon had been following him in a car, he wouldn't be able to now.

Then it occurred to Parry that Social Services knew where he lived. He could probably run as fast he liked home, and still find Gordon waiting there for him.

Parry executed a forty-five degree change of direction. Darren's would be the best house to go to – he hadn't been involved – but Darren lived miles away. Mike, on the other hand, only lived ten or fifteen minutes this way.

“Would you care for a scone, or a fondant fancy?”

Parry stopped dead in his tracks. Afraid of what he might see, he turned around very slowly.

What he saw was a picnic.

How he could have been so blind as to run straight past it without noticing he didn't know.

But there it was.

A large picnic table with a predominantly yellow tartan cloth thrown over it.

There were two silver place settings. There were sandwiches – egg and cress, salmon pâté, cucumber – and there were scones, plain and fruited.

There was clotted cream and blackcurrant, apricot and strawberry conserves. There were two glasses and a jug of fruit juice. There was champagne on ice, in an ornate silver bucket. There was a tea service, including a little bowl with sugar lumps and little silver sugar tongs, something Parry had never before seen in real life.

There was a large flask of hot water which Gordon was pouring into a fine china teapot.

“I normally drink ‘Lady Grey’, but I thought you might be more of an ‘English Breakfast’ kind of a person, hmm?”

This time, fear propelled Parry's feet faster than they'd ever moved in his life. Somewhere in the back of his head a little alarm bell was ringing, but he was only actually listening to the adrenalin being pumped around his system.

Now he wasn't running to anywhere.

He was just running away from the lunatic with the cream tea. And the fondant fancies.

Parry reached the trees and began to follow the path that led to a small green pond. He wasn't on the path for more than twenty seconds before darting up the bank on his left and making for a gap in the fence familiar to all the local schoolboys. He climbed through and joined a pathway that ran alongside some houses. A minute or two later, he emerged by a main road, heading towards a large roundabout.

As Parry reached the roundabout he made for the pedestrian underpass. He had the choice of a long slope, or the stairs, which he took. At the bottom was a tunnel that led to an open-air space inside the roundabout, encompassed by tall graffiti clad walls. The traffic on the road itself rumbled past well above his head.

There were four other exits, apart from the way he had come. The paths met in the middle, dividing the space into pizza slices of earth, now topped with a little grass, weeds, builders' rubble and litter.

Parry reached the centre, arbitrarily picked the second path on his left and headed for the corresponding pedestrian tunnel. As he entered the tunnel, his foot caught on something and he fell, slamming heavily against the cracked pavement.

"I think you and I need a little chat," said Gordon, withdrawing his foot. "This could have been *so* much more civilised. Honestly, I was beginning to think you're avoiding me. A chap could get quite offended."

Parry slowly picked himself up off the ground. His knees and elbows had the kind of numbness that follows an injury and precedes painful swelling. At Gordon's beckoning he followed him back into the pizza slice open space where they could take advantage of the evening sunshine.

“I was going to say this over a cup of tea and a slice of cake, but I suppose this place is as good as any. Parry, you’re coming with me. Do try to stop bleeding.”

Gordon handed Parry a peach-coloured hanky to staunch the flow of blood from his nose.

“Head back,” Gordon advised. “That’s right. You and I, difficult as it may be to believe, have something in common. We have a certain talent. A talent which needs honing, developing, *educating*.”

Parry stared at him blankly.

“Honestly, how hard *did* you fall? You don’t think that woman’s clothes fell off by accident do you? Unquestionably, you have some magical ability. Questionable taste, but unquestionably some magical ability.

“My job is to bring you back to Warthogs. The Warthog Approved School of Magic and Wizardry. There you’ll learn to control your power. Master your abilities.”

Gordon appraised Parry for a moment. “Or die trying.”

“I’m going to wizarding school?” asked Parry, his shaken mind processing Gordon’s words a little slowly.

“Well, you’re going to *a* wizarding school, certainly. To tell you the truth, Warthogs is where most of the more difficult students are placed. We like a challenge.”

“Or do what trying?” Parry was catching up.

“I never said it was going to be easy.”

“Well, all things considered,” said Parry, “I think I’ll pass. I reckon I’ll take my chances here. Learn as I go along.”

“I’m sorry, that’s just not going to be possible. It’s my way, or... or you *really* don’t want to know what the alternative is.” Gordon pursed his lips as he stared at Parry. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Parry’s mind was still on other possible alternatives. He shook his head.

“Ever been to Brighton, Pink Shore Club?”

Parry shook his head again.

“LA? Fairielights?”

Parry shook his head vigorously.

“Strange. You do seem awfully familiar. Are you sure I don’t know you from anywhere?”

Parry tried a new tactic. “You have speak to my foster parents,” he said. “If I’m supposed to change schools, they’ll want to know about it. They’ll have to agree.”

“Tell me, is there still some small part of your tiny little mind that really thinks I’m a social worker? If there is, I’m going to be quite disappointed.”

This is it, thought Parry, I’m being abducted by a gay man. I’ll probably spend the rest of my life chained in some basement somewhere, being visited by men with moustaches and peaked caps, my only solace being endless reruns of *‘The Shawshank Redemption’*.

“Now, you can’t go to school dressed like that. We’re going to need to buy you a few things...”

Lederhosen, Parry shouldn’t wonder.

“And you’ll need all the right equipment, of course...”

Whips, chains, restraint harnesses...

“Now, let me see, it gets dark at what? Nine-thirty? Ten o’clock? And what time is it now, oh, it’s nearly a quarter to seven already. We really must hurry, we’ve so much to buy, and so little time to buy it in. Fortunately I just adore shopping. You’re in the hands of an expert.”

Gordon’s face momentarily wore a surprised expression. And then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell forward like a plank, making no attempt to break his own fall. A trickle of blood had just begun to seep from the back of his injured head.

Parry dropped the brick, and made a hobble for it.



By the time Parry had almost reached home, a plan was forming in his mind.

He knew he had to get away. He didn’t know where Gordon had come from, but clearly the man was deranged. Worse still, homosexual.

Possibly dangerous.

He should have just kept hitting him with the brick, he told himself.

But he did have a plan.

He had to get away, so his first thoughts had been to head for Reading. He'd been to the festival before now, and thought it must be a pretty cool place to hang out any time of year.

There was a tent in the loft, although he'd never actually put it up himself – Mike and Darren quite liked doing that sort of thing.

Then he vaguely remembered campsite toilet facilities.

He really wasn't sure he could face them sober.

Then Parry had a much better idea.

He had his passport at home. He had a fair amount of money in the bank, and he had his foster dad's charge card.

Or at least, he knew where it was hidden.

His foster parents were well-meaning people, a little on the soft side. With any luck they'd keep paying the charge card bills until he was at least eighteen.

Maybe twenty-one.

That was it then.

He'd go to Ibiza.

He could afford to stay in a pretty decent hotel while he sorted himself out and looked for a permanent pad.

He could have it large every night.

He might find some bar work. With a bit of luck he could live the Ibiza life.

That'd be a stroke.

Something to thank Gordon for.

Parry made a mental note to stay away from the gay quarter.

He'd get a bus into town, and train into London. There he could get a train to Gatwick. Or Heathrow.

He could be in Ibiza before Gordon knew what hit him.

Literally.

Convinced of his course of action, Parry turned the last corner into Primrose Drive. He was...

...not home.

This was not Primrose Drive.

Parry turned and looked back the way he'd come.

He stared for a very long moment at the grubby wall.

He touched it, just to make sure it was real.

Parry looked around.

He was in a blind alley.

From what he could see, and the traffic noise, he guessed he was in a large town or city.

There was a group of men at the other end of the alley, the exit end.

The word 'gang' sprung into Parry's mind. Immediately preceded by the word 'vicious'.

Then of course there was the pink tutu.

The pink tutu that Parry was wearing.

Parry sunk down behind a large plastic rubbish bin.

"So, it's come to this, has it?" asked Gordon.

Parry looked up and saw Gordon standing there with a scarf around his head to disguise his injury. "Beaten to death by an angry mob while wearing a pink tutu. I must say I am quite impressed in a way. You're going to be a martyr. People will remember your name for weeks and weeks, months, maybe years even. I shouldn't wonder if they turn your funeral into a Gay Pride parade."

Parry shook his head fearfully. "I'll tell them it's a joke. Fancy dress," he said uncertainly.

Gordon sucked his lips thoughtfully. "You know, I don't think that's going to work. Not only are those very angry people, but they had a bit of a set-to last night. They had parked their motorcycles outside 'The Pink Shore'. You know, I think they might have been looking for trouble, because they were getting really quite abusive towards some of the regulars. So I had a quiet word."

Gordon unwrapped the scarf from his head and looked at the bloodstain, touching himself gingerly behind his head. He snapped the scarf out and glanced at each side to check the bloodstain had gone, and then folded it neatly into his pocket.

"I made their motorbikes into a very interesting sculpture, set it on a traffic island where everybody could see it. I thought the twisted metal served as a powerful counterpoint to the vulnerability of their naked bodies. It looked so lovely 'til the

Fire Brigade came and cut them out of their bikes. You know, I was starting to believe that they weren't art lovers at all, with all the fuss they made.

"And of course the words 'Gay Pride' you've got tattooed across your forehead really aren't going to improve matters for you."

"Please," Parry was shaking with fear. This was no way for a young man to go, beaten to death in a pink dress.

"I'm sorry," said Gordon, "didn't I make myself clear? I suppose it was quite difficult with all that running from one place to another. And then being hit on the head with a brick. My job is to take you to the Warthog Approved School of Magic and Wizardry. Or you'll die while I'm trying."

"Why...what....?" enquired Parry incisively.

"Well, we can't let wizards and witches run around wild now can we? It causes all sorts of trouble. Trouble that I'll only have to sort out at one time or another. It's even more dangerous now than it used to be. Can you imagine the problems if some government got hold of one of us? There is a lot a wizard can do to defend himself, but there are only so many high velocity bullets you can dodge. Explosives can be very tricky. Particularly the thermonuclear ones. No, we really don't want to get into that. So we keep ourselves to ourselves.

"We've made some space for our kind adjacent to this muddled world. We can keep an eye on it, we can come and visit, but we really wouldn't want to live here. Now you could come with me. Or you could stay here. In spirit, anyway."

Parry sat trembling against the wall, his eyes fixed on the gang at the other end of the alley.

"I'll just give them a quick whistle then, shall I?" asked Gordon, bringing two fingers up to his mouth...