

THE PREY

By Stephanie Jackson

The creature emerged from the shadows, cloaked in black from head to toe, a tall and slender figure bending to the whims of the breeze like a naked willow on a winter's day. His long thin fingers; like emerging shoots that would become new branches and stretch out across the muttering waters of a stream, were tipped with the glinting claws of a ferocious beast, and he was poised to snatch any unsuspecting prey.

"Come in! Come in!" he whispered slowly and seductively, beckoning me, with a glint of evil in his ebony eyes, towards his lair. "Take my hand!" he murmured in words that seemed impossible to resist as he proffered a bony hand draped with skin as smooth and pale as alabaster. "Don't be afraid. No harm will come to you," he continued in a voice that wafted through the air with little more ferocity than the flapping of a butterfly's gaudy wings. But obedience was not mine to offer as I contemplated my escape from the terror that the creature ignited. He smiled with a row of sharp and gleaming teeth. It was the smile of a predator hungry for blood, a predator skilled at deception, a predator that had never known denial, that had always been victorious, and as the flames of fear flickered neither fight nor flight were an option, for my feet seemed to have been nailed firmly to the floor.

His hand, unwavering, reached slowly out to mine, his fingers twining around my ice cold digits like a swarm of diminutive and writhing serpents, and as he tugged gently, his predatory smile never wavering, I seemed to glide involuntarily down a dimly lit tunnel into the cavern from which he had emerged.

I stepped cautiously over the threshold with intensifying trepidation, confident of discovering nothing beyond the gaping entrance other than a deluge of fear and pain. The instruments of his agonising trade were laid neatly out across a wooden table, their metallic components illuminated by the dull light of a computer screen that flickered with continually changing images of landscapes, tranquillity in digital form, designed to eradicate fear, to instil submission in its wake, and to impose an hypnotic air of calm on each and every victim.

"Sit here!" he commanded, tapping his fingers on the bed with its stark white sheets and a tangle of straps that would restrain his prey, and, mesmerised by his uncompromising smile, I conceded defeat with the terrifying anticipation of the torment that was to come. He'd jubilantly, with a sadistic smile, stretch, twist, and contort my limbs. He'd grin with muted delight at my screams of agony and my gasps of distress as I struggled to free myself from the restraints he'd utilised, but every sound uttered by both the beast and his prey would be muffled by the locked door that hid his world from reality. I was his prisoner. I was doomed to do his bidding. Everything, he insisted with his unwavering bestial smile, was for my own good. And who was I to argue, for he was – the physiotherapist.

*The characters in this story are entirely fictitious and bear no resemblance to any persons - or monsters - living or dead, and certainly not to Jack Clements.

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