

The Beta Reader

By Jonathan Wheatley



The shrill cries of Axl Rose screaming 'Paradise City' from her mobile phone woke her up. She reached across the bed, past the empty space where he used to lay, and unlocked her phone. Her ankle itched, and she scratched at it. The room was quiet as she scrolled through her emails. The first thing she did every morning. She didn't expect anyone to have replied yet; the book was just over 75,000 words, no-one would have read it that fast.

That strangers were reading and judging her first novel made her stomach turn. Beta readers were what he called them, he had told her about them when she was coming to the end of her first draft six months ago. She had found a group on Facebook, started a chat with a few of the people online and then posted to the group asking for beta readers for her first novel. She was surprised by the number of replies, but she was picky and wanted to choose the right readers.

She chose three people. And, she sent them the final copy last night, via e-mail, before sitting back on the sofa with a glass of cheap red wine and tried to watch some TV, wrapped in a blanket in a onesie decorated with cats, but she couldn't stop thinking about the people reading her words.

Ping. She had an email from one of the beta readers. She clicked on it, expecting it to be a thank you for sending it through. But, the email contained a large file, one she struggled to open on her phone. She raised her eyebrows and threw the quilt off her bed and looked across the bedroom to find where she had laid down her laptop. She picked it up, opened her bedroom door and made her way to the sofa, stopping at the kitchen to flick on the filter coffee machine, savouring the warm roast smell that filled the air.

The reassuring drip of the coffee machine was the only sound in the room as she sat on the comfy cream sofa and opened the laptop, hearing the whirr inside as it powered up. She entered her password. The screen pinged and she clicked on the email and it opened. A video played.

The screen was dark, she could make out a silhouette of a man with short hair, it reminded her of one of those videos where the witness is blacked out while telling their story on TV.

'Hello Alice,' The voice said, distorted and mechanical sounding, 'I like your story very much.'

Alice folded her legs onto the sofa and hugged her chest as the video continued playing.

'I especially liked the bit with the girl home alone, and when that man came and watched her sleep.'

The screen flickered and then moved; it was being recorded on a mobile. The room was dark, and the camera bounced while the person walked through a shrouded hallway.

Her stomach twisted as she recognised the door. Alice looked up at the hallway leading to her room. She leaned forward, breathing fast as she watched a gloved hand open the door and enter the room. It was dark, but she could see the outline of a bed and the shape of a body. The camera approached the bed and she watched a gloved hand remove the sheet and she saw the ghost-like illumination of white skin in the dark.

The hand disappeared and a second later re-appeared holding a scalpel. The blade was black. The screen went black, and the video ended .

Alice sat alone on the sofa, staring open-mouthed at the screen. She moved to click and see if there was more to the message when she saw red on her fingers and felt the itch on her ankle again. She heard a car honk its horn outside.

Bending over, she positioned her ankle so she could see the back. There were marks, like paper cuts, on the dry skin at the back of her ankle and dry blood. She grabbed her phone, opened the camera and took a picture. Looking at it a shudder ran through her body. She could make out a single word in long sliced letters, the vertical line of the 'T' crossing the horizontal line, the horizontal line of the 'H' crossing the twin vertical lines, one sharp line which she took to be an 'P' and then, almost joined, the hacks of horizontal and vertical lines of an 'E' and an 'F'. 'THIEF'.

Her hand shook as she dialled 999 and waited for an answer.

'Emergency, which service please?'

'I need the police, someone broke into my home.'

'Sounds just like a book I read,' said a deadpan voice which then laughed.

Alice dropped the phone, and the screen smashed as it hit the wooden floor. She could hear the laughter. A calm almost child-like giggle whispered through the room.

And then a voice came from behind her.

'You stole my book,' It said before she felt the blow to her head.

Alice woke tied to a chair at her dining table. The big wooden table was empty save for a fruit bowl with a decomposing brown banana in it and fruit flies circling above. To the side of her sat Jack, only it wasn't Jack, not anymore, he looked different. She couldn't work out what had changed. She hadn't seen him for six months, hadn't even heard from him. His eyes were wired, pin-prick pupils, like the nights he used to turn up at 4am knocking on her front door.

He watched her, those eyes taking in every line of her face. She felt like a monkey in the zoo. A smile came over his face, it didn't touch his eyes. His dirty fingers played with the banana in the fruit bowl.

'Hi Alice,' he said, 'remember me?'

'Jack... Jack, what are you... what are you doing?'

He tilted his head to the side, 'I am sorry, Jack isn't here right now,' and smiled again.

'What are you talking about? What's happened to you, Jack?'

He stood up, pushing the chair over behind him. It clattered to the floor, 'I'M NOT JACK! Don't you recognise me? You created me apparently.'

Alice sat frozen in her chair, she had seen Jack angry before but not like this. It was his face, but his voice sounded different, his clothes looked different and he'd never worn his hair that way in the three years they'd been together. The Jack she knew wouldn't be seen dead in a leather jacket or with slicked back hair. Her eyes opened wide, she knew who he looked like.

'You look like him,' she said.

Jack nodded, 'Who is he?'

She sat back in her chair, shaking her head. Her short blonde hair sweeping in front of her eyes. The ropes were stinging her skin where they were tied too tight to her wrists and ankles. The cold of the metal was smooth and dead against her legs. She felt tears coming but choked them back.

'Jack, he isn't real. He's just a character in my boo...'

She felt a sharp sting as he slapped her around her face. Her cheek flashed red and hot. Now the tears came.

Jack was pacing in front of her, rubbing his wrists, 'Whose book Alice, whose book?'

She tried to reach a hand up to rub her cheek, but the rope cut deeper into her wrist. She felt naked and alone. Jack paced in front of her mumbling to himself, his head down, a thick greasy bang of dark hair falling over his pale face.

‘Luke,’ she whispered. He stopped pacing and bent down in front of her, his face moved closer to her, a smell of rancid meat and liquor on his breath. His eyes were different colours. One was a sparkling blue, and the other was a dull mustard colour.

‘What happened to you?’ she asked?

‘Karma is a bitch, isn’t it! You stole something from me, Alice.’

‘The book, I can give it back... I will give it back, it’s yours.’

‘It was more than just a book Alice, it was a diary. And, you read it without telling me, and then turned it into a novel.’

Alice’s eyes opened wide, the whites were bloodshot, thin red veins leading to the shocking blue of her Irises. A diary, but the things she had read. The things he had done.

‘But, the things you wrote about...’

Jake/Luke nodded slowly, his lips raised in a sneer, maniacal eyes boring into her. He sat down in the chair next to her.

‘I bet it looked like I had turned into him, didn’t it? The truth is scarier, I always was him. Jake was my mask and when you pushed him away he vanished,’ he said, ‘I really liked your story though, you embellished certain parts and gave me some ideas, such as last night,’ he looked down at her ankle.

‘But... how did you know?’

‘You’re not the only one who snoops,’ he sneered, ‘Once you kicked Jake out, I had to read the rest somehow, and then I saw your post. Knowing you, I knew exactly what you would look for, I, well he told you about beta-readers in the first place.’

Alice struggled, wriggling in her chair to get loose of the ropes. It toppled and fell to the side. She landed on her side, a scream came out as she felt something break, but one of her legs came free. She kicked out at the rope holding her other leg. Then a shadow appeared over her. He was smiling again.

‘You can’t release that book Alice, I won’t let you. And thanks to you I have two more visits to make today.’

She wriggled harder; the ropes cutting into her wrists, sticky, warm blood dripped onto the floor.

‘It’s dangerous to read something that doesn’t belong to you, and more dangerous to copy it.’ He bent down next to her on one knee. She couldn’t see it, but she knew he had something in his other hand, the one hidden behind his body.

He watched her struggle, her hair stuck to her sweaty face, her breathing heavy. He was enjoying it. Her chest fell and raised and fell again. He could see the curve of her breasts under the onesie. Spittle and snot dripped down her face, she knew her time was nearly up.

Alice raised herself from the ground and with all her strength threw her body against one arm of the chair, unlike the legs the arms were made of plastic, it snapped, sharp splinters ripped at her flesh. But she was free, she could fight back. She didn’t see the scalpel in his hand, its blade catching the light like fire, as he pulled it across her throat.

A current of blood pooled onto the floor, tracing streams into the notches in the wood, and Jake/Luke stepped back to avoid it getting onto his shoes. Her vision blurred as she saw him looking down at her as her legs kicked for the last time and the sparkle left her eyes.

‘They always say, you shouldn’t trust anyone you meet online.’

The End

If you liked this short story, you’re going to love the debut full-length historical horror novel ‘The Priory’ coming 2020.