

Brought to Book

By Kath Harper

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I was lurking in the women's loo when it happened. It was an act of desperation. We'd decided that staying in the library all night was the only way we were going to finish this bloody assignment. It was major, it was way overdue, and if we didn't hand it in before the office opened the next day we were dead meat as far as the course was concerned. Years of study, and it came down to one lousy assignment.

So we were hiding in the toilets. Brian was betting on that being the one place that big prick Sniffy Field wouldn't check when he locked up. A quick glance, maybe, to make sure no one was having a pee before they headed off to the station and the last train to Outer Boonies. But Brian had that covered. 'Leave the cubicle door open just far enough so Sniffy won't think it's occupied,' he told me, 'then stand on the seat, but crouch down so your head doesn't stick up over the top. Sniffy will only be looking for feet under locked doors,' he said.

Brian reckoned he could do the same in the men's dunnies, except he'd have to fold himself over because he's so tall. Then we could sneak out when the lights went off, and have the whole library to ourselves. No waiting for books to come back, no queuing up for a chair or an empty desk to work at. All we needed was our laptops, a good torch and a few snacks to keep us going, and we were set. We could use the references we needed, finish off our assignments in peace, email them in before the tutor logged on, and everything would be sweet.

If Brian said it could be done, I wasn't about to argue. He's great at organising things like that – to the point of being anal about every little detail. And heaven help anyone who gets in the way of one of his grand plans. Brian will watch and wait, then down the track a bit he'll make them pay big time, in some really painful or humiliating way.

Like when Jeremy stuffed up his scheme to hack the college computer system so he could quietly 'fix up' his marks for the whole of first year. He had the passwords, he'd cracked the security barriers, he was in, it was all working as he'd planned. But Jeremy came bumbling along at the critical moment, knocked Brian's elbow and made him hit the wrong key. The barriers slammed down, the codes reset and that was that. Except that two months afterwards Jeremy was thrown out of his

student housing and grilled by the cops because three girls claimed he'd sexually harassed them. Everyone knew it was bullshit. It had Brian's signature all over it, but no one could prove anything. Brian's way is to set something up, then be miles away when the shit hits the fan. Jeremy went back to the country and a few weeks later his ute hit a tree at high speed. Brian said it just proved what a klutz he was. He's such a caring guy, our Brian.

He's not my boyfriend, by the way. He's Mum's best friend Julie's stepson, and those two decided it would be a great idea for us to be study buddies – although he spends more time trying to come up with ways of getting out of work, while I knuckle down and get on with it, once the pressure gets intense enough. Then Brian 'reviews' my work, adds a few touches of his own, and usually manages to scrape through. He can be quite entertaining in a slightly creepy kind of way, and he has some interesting mates, so I've let him get away with it, but the relationship is definitely getting frayed. After this semester I plan to ditch him and go my own way.

Anyway, there I am crouched on the toilet seat, with my legs starting to cramp. I wonder how much longer it will be before Brian gives me the signal that it's safe to come out. The place is dead quiet. I can hear water trickling in a cistern further down the line of cubicles, rain splattering against the window and trams clanking

along Swanston Street. I can feel the weight of all the words in their little paper prisons, stacked, waiting. We're all waiting. When I breathe, it's as if the whole library breathes with me.

There's a thud, then clattering and thumping mixed up with a horrible gurgling, gargling sound, another thud, then silence again.

I try to tell myself it came from outside – probably just some innocent passerby being robbed or beaten up by nightclub rejects – but my mind doesn't believe me. Whatever it was, it happened inside the building, and pretty damn close to where I'm crouching. Cowering. Shivering. Wishing I was in a crowded bar somewhere, slugging down a glass of cheap red and shouting at Brian's mates over the cheerful racket. Or even on a near empty train out to Watergardens, being menaced by hoons who came into town looking for someone to bash up but couldn't find a victim with the wrong coloured skin and decided to pick on me instead. Anywhere but here.

Then it dawns on me that it must have been Brian, stumbling around in the dark and tripping over something – probably one of those stupid yellow footstool things you use to reach high shelves or sit on when there's no desk free. He might be lying out there

hurt, and wondering why I haven't come to help. But is it too soon? Has Sniffy locked up and gone, or is he still lurking out there?

I unclench my knees, and just manage not to yell when my calves cramp. I ease the cubicle door open. It creaks. I wait and listen. Nothing. The washroom door is heavy, and I have to shove my scarf into the gap to stop it shutting with a clang. Still no sound outside. I scramble in my backpack for the penlight torch, but I don't need it. It's surprising how much light comes in from the street. You don't notice until all the lights inside are turned off. There are deep shadows, but I can see the walkway, and the top of the stairs. I peer down. There's a dark shape at the bottom, very still.

'Brian!' I try to whisper, but in the emptiness it sounds more like a shout. Nothing moves. I can feel the books watching, waiting to see what I do next.

I creep down the stairs, but stop before I get to the bottom. I whisper Brian's name again, but the shape doesn't respond. He just lies there, sort of shapelessly. From closer up, I can see books scattered around him.

Why doesn't he say something? I decide it's a set-up. He's waiting until I get close enough, then he'll leap up and scare the shit out of me, and have the added fun of

choking me to stop me screaming. So I attack first. I take a flying leap off the step and go to fling myself on top of him – then try to stop in mid-air. Have you ever seen a stalking cat spring, then change its mind mid-leap and go straight up in the air? I go straight down, and land in a pile of legs and arms and backpack, almost on top of Brian.

Except it's not Brian. It's Sniffy Field. And he's not pretending. He's dead. He must be, because he's looking straight at me, and he didn't even blink when I almost landed on him. I crawl over and make myself feel for a pulse at his neck. Not a flicker. He feels cold and sort of clammy. Gross! I back away and collapse onto the bottom step.

Shit! What do I do now? And where the fuck is Brian?

I thunder back up the stairs – no point in creeping around now – and go charging into the men's dunny, shouting Brian's name. Not as many cubicles as in the women's loo, so it's easy to tell he's not in any of them. But the metal-framed window down the far end is pushed out just far enough for a skinny guy like him to squeeze through. I lean out into the rain and shine the torch down. I can see where he could hang off the sill, get his feet onto a ledge and then drop down to the bluestone paving without breaking his legs.

He's gone, and I'm still here, with a stiffening Sniffy and no way out. Even if I could get my boobs and bum through the window (doubtful), I'm such a short-arse there's no way I'd be able to reach the ledge. Just thinking about it makes my head spin and my knees quiver. I'm stuck in an empty library, in the dark, with a corpse.

I shut the window so I won't be tempted into trying something stupid and desperate. Then I have to talk myself out of just crumpling up in a corner. 'It's the men's dunny. It stinks. Get a grip, Ginny girl.' I know there's no point but I check the downstairs loos anyway. No Brian, and no way out.

I skirt around the bundle of clothes that used to be Sniffy. I can't bring myself to touch him again, and I try not to look at him. I huddle in one of the armchairs behind the stairs, where I don't have to see him, and make myself think about this rationally – not my strong point at the best of times, and this is definitely not one of those.

I give it my best shot, and I try to leave Sniffy out of the calculations. Whatever I decide, it's going to make bugger-all difference to him, but a bit of sympathy keeps sneaking through. He was a mean bully who got his kicks out of making every student's life as difficult as possible. Brian has been muttering for days about how Sniffy caught him trying to smuggle a 'reference only' book out

and threatened to get him banned from the library for the rest of the year. But it's still a really crappy way to end your life, tripping over your own feet and falling arse over tit down the stairs at work.

My mental list of options comes out as:

1) Escape and leave Sniffy for the cleaners to find in the morning. For: I'll be right out of the picture and won't have to explain what I was doing here in the first place. Against: the cleaners have enough shit to deal with. And I've already sussed that there's no way out that would leave me in one piece. Okay, scrub that one. Next!

2) Hide somewhere until the library opens, then stroll out nonchalantly when there's enough people around that one extra won't be noticed. For: same as above, but less risk of collateral damage. Against: I'll have to stay in the library all night with a corpse. Besides, as soon as scenario 1 happens, they'll slam the doors shut and call the cops before I have a chance to make a run for it. No go.

3) Call Brian and ask him to get me out. For: He's excellent at working out how to get around tricky situations. Against: He took off and left me here, so what makes me think he's going to help now? And anyway, his mobile is sitting in the mud at the bottom of the Yarra. It went over the railings on Princes Bridge last week, when

I tried to grab it after he took a really crappy photo of me and went to post it on Facebook. He gave me the silent treatment for two days.

4) Call the cops myself and get it over with. For: I get out of here – eventually. Against: I'll still have to explain what I'm doing here. I don't like that one either.

5) ... There is no 5. My brain has given up. It doesn't want to be rational right now. It wants to scream and run.

In the end I realise I've got no choice. I dig out my phone and dial 000. It takes quite a while to convince the operator that it's not a prank call. Lucky I've come prepared for a long night. While I'm waiting for the cops to show up I get through most of a packet of roasted almonds and try to get my story straight.

I decide I'll go with the truth – mostly. I'll leave Brian out of it for now, at least until I track him down and find out why the sneaky bastard did a runner and left me to face all this shit on my own. He'd better have a good reason. I know he's had a few face-offs with the cops in the past – little things like running red lights on his bike, or riding without a helmet. He doesn't seem to think the law applies to him. But that's no justification for disappearing without even telling me. I start to wonder exactly when he went out the window. Was he gone

before Sniffy took his final dive, or did he see it happen and panic?

The first shock is when the cops arrive, with the security guy to let them in. They're both female, and man, have they got attitude. I guess it comes from having to fight your way up in such a blokey belligerent world, but hey, I'm one of them, they don't have to take it out on me. The one with three stripes and a crown on her shoulder thingies goes to check out Sniffy. The other one, just an average, humourless plod with no stripes – a constable, I'm guessing – corrals me in a corner and gets serious about extracting details of who I am, where I live, what I'm doing here, whether I knew 'the male deceased' and how I came to find the body. I give her everything she asks for, and a bit more to make sure. Luckily, she doesn't ask if anyone else was with me.

The next, much bigger, shock comes when Stripy Shoulders comes stalking over and gets into the act. We go through the whole thing again, but this time with an extra edge of menacing disbelief and outright suggestion that I'm lying. After she's reduced me to a stuttering mess she drops the bombshell that Sniffy didn't just fall down the stairs. He was pushed. He got a whack from behind that might have broken his neck before he fell. And the object that he got whacked with, it seems, is a ring binder with my name on it. Can I explain that?

I just stare at her. I know I must look as guilty as hell, but – hell! This is a total game-changer. If someone pushed Sniffy down the stairs, and I'm the only one here, and the library's locked ... you can see where the finger is pointing.

Time for a major strategy review. Stripy has already called in the forensics guys, and now she stomps off to direct operations. I slump into a chair under the fish-eye stare of The Plod and go back to being logical. If Sniffy was murdered, and it wasn't me that did it, it must have been ... Shit! I have to tell them about Brian being here too. If I don't, and they find out anyway, I'll be even deeper in the poo for withholding information. I start picturing the *Daily Hun* screaming

BODY IN THE LIBRARY PLOT:

TEEN LOVERS HELD

OK, so I tell them about Brian. But are they going to believe me? What if they think I'm just trying to shift the blame onto someone else? What evidence is there that Brian was even here, and that he had my binder in his bag? He won't have left any fingerprints, because he always wears those stupid skeleton-print gloves, even when it's stinking hot. He says he's got bad circulation.

He probably managed not to make any boot prints on the dunny seat too – if he even went ahead with that plan. That only leaves the window – which I shut. If he left marks on the ledge when he jumped down, the rain will probably have washed them off by now.

The light comes on in my brain with a blinding flash. He set me up. This is one of his little revenge ploys, but it's a double whammy. He's not just getting even with Sniffy (and then some!), he's getting back at me for drowning his phone. Which means he's not only covered his own tracks, he's set it up so that it looks like I did the dirty deed. Now I'm totally screwed.

Stripy comes striding back to have at me again. I launch into my revised story, but I can see she's not buying it. I offer to show her how Brian got out, but she sends The Plod instead, with strict instructions not to contaminate the scene. Contaminate the men's dunny? That's a laugh, except I don't feel like laughing right now. And even less so when The Plod comes back and reports, with a smug little sideways glance at me, 'no evidence of unusual occupancy or forced exit from the gentlemen's washroom facilities, ma'am'. That's it, then. I'm not exactly arrested, but the invitation to accompany them to the station so I can 'help them with their enquiries' doesn't seem to have a 'No' option attached.

They shove me into the back of the cop car under the sympathetic gaze of a homeless guy who's sleeping rough in a doorway. I want to apologise for disturbing his night, but I decide it might sound like an admission of guilt so I don't. I'm photographed and fingerprinted and relieved of everything that might be a danger to me, them or society in general. I don't know whether they're allowed to do all that if I'm not arrested, but I figure it's safer not to give them ideas. They finally let me call Mum. She's definitely not happy about being woken up, but she figures out pretty quickly that it's serious and she needs to get down here, like, now. She wants to bring Julie, who's a lawyer, but when I tell her Brian's involved she gets why that's not such a great idea.

The questioning goes on and on. Stripy is like a pit bull terrier. She never lets go.

'Why were you in the library?'

'Where were you?'

'Which toilets?'

'Which cubicle?'

'Was anyone else with you?'

‘Was he in the women’s toilet with you?’

‘Did you see him go in there?’

‘Why not?’

‘How do you know where he was?’

‘What time did you go into the toilets?’

‘What time did you come out of the toilets?’

‘How do you know it was late?’

‘What made you come out?’

‘What sort of noise?’

‘How long after you heard the noise did you come out of the toilet?’

‘Why did you come downstairs?’

‘Where was the body of the deceased when you found him?’

‘What made you think he was dead?’

‘Did you touch the deceased?’

‘Did you know who he was?’

‘Why was your binder beside the body?’

‘Why did you go back upstairs?’

‘Was the window open or closed when you went into the men’s washroom?’

‘You say this “Brian” escaped out the window. How did he do that?’

‘Why would he run away and leave you here?’

‘Why did you close the window?’

‘Why didn’t you tell us about Brian sooner?’

‘What else have you forgotten to tell us? Let’s go back to the beginning. Why were you in the library?’

‘Why did you ... ?’

‘Where did you ... ?’

‘How did you ... ?’

And on, and on, and on. Every time I say something a bit different they jump on it, until I get tangled up in my own words. In the end I'm so tired that my brain shuts down. I'm asleep with my eyes open. I can hear the questions but they don't make any sense. I stare vacantly at Stripy. She stares back, right through me. 'That's enough for now. Interview terminated at 2.10am.'

The Plod turns off the tape, and Stripy turns back to me. 'Right. Get out of here. But don't think about taking off anywhere. We'll want to talk to you again.'

'You mean ... I can go?'

'Out! And take my card, in case you suddenly remember something else you conveniently forgot to tell me earlier.'

I stumble out to the front desk. Mum's been waiting for me. She gives me a huge hug, and I somehow manage not to sob on her bosom. The way she's glaring at Plod and Stripy, she must think they've been torturing a confession out of me. I'm tempted to sool her onto them, but I just want to get out of there and go home. Once she gets me into the car, it's question time all over again, but this time with feeling.

'Oh, Ginny! What on earth possessed you to do such a mad thing?'

'I really don't know, Mum. It seemed like a great idea when Brian suggested it. We were desperate.'

'And where's Brian now? I want a word with that young man. Have you spoken to him?'

I explain about Brian's phone, but then she wants to go round to Julie's place and have it out with him face to face. I plead exhaustion, and she gives in, for now. He won't be there, anyway. He'll be lying low somewhere, waiting to see how his little plan works out. I know Mum'll be on the phone to Julie first thing in the morning, but that's at least four hours away and not my immediate concern. What I need right now is sleep, and lots of it. After that I need to do some serious thinking.

Mum's not around when I stagger out mid-morning. She's left me a note saying she's having coffee with Julie in town. Good. They'll be there for hours, confabbing about last night. That gives me some head space to work out what to do about Brian. I can't let him get away with this. Revenge is all very well, but involving me in murder is more than a bit extreme, in my opinion. I need a plan, and I need to think like Brian. Set a sneak to catch a sneak.

I settle down at the kitchen table with a pot of liquorice tea and a plateful of toast and Vegemite. I can't think on an empty stomach. The first step is to find Brian, and

convince him that his plan didn't work – at least as far as I'm concerned. Then I have to somehow get him to confess, not just to me but to Stripy and Plod or some of their cohorts. That's going to be a mite tricky, and I have to work fast, before word gets out about what happened last night.

I start with the obvious. Knowing there'll be no one there, I phone Julie's place and leave a message on the answering machine. 'Hi Brian, it's Ginny. Look, I'm sorry about last night. I got cold feet and took off just before the library closed. Lucky you had my notes, eh? Hope it all worked out. Give me a call.'

Next I phone Brian's mate Mal. I figure he's the one Brian's most likely to call on if he needs a bed or a bolthole. They've been besties since kindy, and Mal sometimes lends a hand with Brian's little schemes.

Mal sounds surprised to hear my voice. 'Ginny! I thought you were ... Where are you?'

'At home. Why? Where else would I be?'

'Oh, of course, yeah, cool. What's up?'

'I thought you might know where Brian is. I have to get in touch with him. I lent him my notes and I need them

back. There's a chance I can still get the assignment in, sort of on time. The trouble is, I don't know whether he'll want to talk to me, because ... well, I shot through on him last night at the library. I suppose he told you what we were planning to do?'

Mal hesitates, not sure how much he should admit to. 'Yeah, he mentioned something about a do or die effort.'

That's one way of putting it. I ask him to pass the message on to Brian if he sees him. From the whispering I can hear in the background, I'm guessing that'll be pretty soon.

Which means I need to get ready for stage two. I make one more call, to cover all bases, check that my phone's still got plenty of charge, then get out of my PJs into something that looks a bit less like it's been slept in. In case Brian's watching the house, I slope off through the back gate and along the railway line to the station, just in time to catch a train into the city.

If – when – Brian gets the message that his plan didn't work, he's going to be super pissed off. And, unless he's got contacts in the police, which is highly unlikely, the only way he can find out what happened is to talk to me. I'm counting on him, and he doesn't let me down.

About 12.30 my phone rings. It's him. We chat as if neither of us has a problem in the world, and I arrange to meet him in an hour at the little café downstairs in my favourite bookshop. So far, so good. I just hope I've got the timing right.

The café's busier than usual, so we have to take a table in the middle – not ideal for a private conversation. Brian keeps looking around, and I can see he's on edge. It won't take much to push him over. Before I can speak, he grabs my wrist, hard.

'What the hell happened to you last night at the library?'

'Look, Brian, I'm really sorry—'

'Not yet, but you will be.' He twists my wrist until I yelp. He's smiling, an ugly smile.

'Tell me what the fuck you were playing at. I thought we had an agreement.' His voice is getting louder. He's almost snarling at me.

'I got scared.' Like I'm scared now. 'I couldn't stay in there all night. I had to leave.'

'Why didn't you come and tell me you were going?'

That's good, coming from him.

'I was embarrassed. There were other guys in there.'

Now I sound like a real bimbo, but it works. He loses it completely and starts shouting at me.

'You stupid little bitch! You were supposed to be there. I had it all planned. Sniffy gets what's coming to him, and so do you. But you have to take off like a scared rabbit and stuff it all up.'

By this time he's almost breaking my wrist. I try to pull away but he drags me to my feet.

'I'll fix you. You're coming with me – right now!'

The two men at the next table stand up suddenly. The bigger one puts his hand on Brian's shoulder.

'No, son, you've got it all wrong. You're the one that's coming with us. Brian Watson, I'm arresting you for the murder of Robert Field.'

There's more, all the stuff about rights and silence and evidence, but I don't really hear it. I'm slumped in my chair, flexing my wrist to make sure it's still in one piece. Stripy appears and pulls up a chair. She's wearing a sharp city suit, and she's almost smiling.

'Well,' she says. 'What a coincidence.'

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Thanks for being here.’

‘I wouldn’t have missed it for quids,’ she says, and gets up. ‘Oh, by the way, you might like to know that the forensic guys reckon it would have taken a much taller person than you to hit Sniffy, er, Mr Field, on the neck with that binder. And we found some useful skin tissue samples on the bathroom windowsill that we’re confident of matching.’

‘Oh,’ I say. Not exactly a sparkling response, but I’m all out of smart one-liners. Besides, I figure she deserves to exit on a high. She’s got her man, and I’m off the hook.

Now my biggest problem goes back to being how not to fail my course. And I’ll worry about that tomorrow. Today I’m going to find somewhere to sit in the sun and feel free. Maybe read a book. Maybe not.

Kath Harper

Kath Harper won the inaugural Athenaeum Library ‘Body in the Library’ Award in 2012 with this story about a quiet night in the library that turns deadly. She was a teacher, then an editor, indexer and proofreader, and is now retired and an occasional writer of plays and short stories.