

THE BOOK CLUB

written by

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When you say body *in* the library, well, allow me to correct you, body *all over* the library would be more accurate. A leg, hairy, wedged between books. It was so unexpected it took time to decipher. Then on another shelf, what turned out to be a torso. Male, barrel chest. The head was further on, fiftyish, shaven, looking startled. No sign of a struggle. It wasn't until I saw the arm, hand clutching a whip, that my blood ran cold. The dead man (I thought there was probably only one) was telling us something.

Librarians by day, dominatrixes by night. Or should that be dominatrices? In any case, we had excellent work-life balance. Sleep was a problem sometimes, getting enough of it, but we installed a camp bed and worked out a roster.

By 'we', I mean Lynette, Daisy, Wayne and myself: Eleanor, chief librarian. We'd worked together for years. We mastered technology, ran story sessions for the young, helped the elderly find large-print. Shelved and shelved and shelved. And one year, over Christmas lunch at the RSL, we found ourselves yet again bemoaning our narrow lives. None of us was married. Lynette was divorced, Daisy not interested, Wayne not legally able and I – well, my romantic dreams were just dying embers.

It was Daisy's idea. Christmas hat on her curls, she proposed turning our basement archive – empty because we'd made everything virtual – into some sort of club. *An establishment*, she said proudly. *What this suburb needs is an establishment.*

We warmed to the idea. We would be equal partners. We couldn't advertise, of course. We had to remain anonymous. What we need is masks, joked Wayne. Daisy's face lit up. She raised her hand and said, in her light voice, *think about Fifty Shades of Grey. What about, oh, I don't know, an S&M establishment?* We researched it. We had to overcome some preconceptions but we each invested and then we were up and running. We called our venture the Book Club.

Word got round, faster than I could have imagined. Most of our clients had jobs so we didn't see them in the day but occasionally one would come in with a wife or child, looking lost, not comfortable in a library. *Let me serve that one*, Wayne would say, meaningfully.

For a while all went well. We found ourselves fitter and somehow more confident. We recouped our investments and more, so that Christmas lunches became increasingly luxurious. We stopped complaining. And then Jacqueline arrived.

One morning the mayor, bluff and wide, came thrusting through the glass doors. Behind him trailed a small young woman, the palest young woman I have ever seen. Jacqueline. Big black-rimmed glasses, tights, T-shirt. Hair scraped into a bun. The mayor explained that Jacqueline had dropped out of a third

secretarial course, a most expensive one. He was, he said, *at the end of his tether* and he would like Jacqueline to join the library as an intern. *Suitable work for a woman*, he said. Jacqueline kept her eyes on her Doc Martens. I protested, to no avail. Jacqueline would start on Monday.

We held an emergency meeting on Sunday at the Book Club. It looked strange with the lights on, black walls and the dungeon and the ornamental axes. But we were oblivious. What to do? In the end we didn't have much choice. We would just have to hold our tongues. And, suggested Lynette, we would have to dissuade Jacqueline from becoming a librarian, at least with us. *I look to you, Eleanor*, she said, *to take the lead.*

Jacqueline arrived. It pains me to say this but none of us was friendly. To her fell all the jobs we hated, shelving in particular. Daisy, to whom shelving is like breathing, taught her. She picked it up very quickly. But Jacqueline was hard to make out. She arrived early, she left late. She was quiet to the point of self-effacement. At break-times she sat by herself, huddled over a computer, or reading. Once I found her with Voltaire. Another time with the *Wall Street Journal*. Jacqueline was clearly not stupid. Why was she here? What was going on in that pale skull of hers?

And then, walking to my car in the early hours, I was approached by two large and unattractive men. One tapped me on the shoulder, the other blocked my path. They told me a 'Mr Bishop' knew about the Book Club, that it intruded on his

‘patch’, and that unless I closed it down within a fortnight they would have to, and here I quote, ‘Give the papers something to print.’

I needed a strategy. I had read of Mr Bishop, a so-called *colourful identity* who continually evaded the law. I certainly didn’t want to antagonize someone like that. On the other hand, I was doing extremely well out of the Club (better than the others, I must confess) and besides, I dislike being threatened. I told my colleagues about the incident and wished I had not. It only exacerbated their anxiety. Our need for secrecy had already started to affect us. We were jumpy, constantly looking over our shoulders. Wayne and Lynette especially seemed changed. Even before my meeting with the gangsters I found Wayne crying quietly a few times in *Modern Australian Poetry* and Lynette acquired a particularly nasty cold, snuffing her way across the floor, tissues falling out of the wrists of various hairy sweaters. So, when a week later I saw the body parts before me, I felt that Mr Bishop (as well as ignoring his deadline) was giving me a particularly strong warning. Before I could decide what to do, the cleaners arrived. I hadn’t thought to head them off. General hysteria followed and I was forced to call the police, something I would have preferred to delay.

Meanwhile the others gathered, Wayne in tears again, Lynette straight to the bathroom. Even Daisy, not generally interested in the world around her, sat perched on a chair, wringing her little hands. Jacqueline alone appeared in control of

her faculties. She seemed about to tell me something when the police arrived, two meaty constables who turned green and went outside to recover. They returned to secure the crime scene and phone their superiors. In the meantime we closed the library and repaired to the tearoom.

I spelled things out. Unless we found an explanation for the body in the library, and in short order, the police would search the premises, discover the Book Club and then the jig would most definitely be up. And for once, I had no strategy, no idea how to proceed. Then Jacqueline sat forward, put her white hands between her knees, and said, ‘But I know who did this...’

She was interrupted by the arrival of a tall man about my own age. ‘Good morning,’ he said. ‘I am Detective Inspector St Regis. Who is in charge here?’ I rose to greet him. He looked at me with clear blue eyes and my heart sank. In his white shirt and well-cut suit, Inspector St Regis looked more sophisticated and clever than any policeman I’d ever seen or even read about.

‘Eleanor Lustre?’ he asked. I nodded.

‘You seem to have acquired the body of Barry Bishop,’ he said, in a low and rather appealing voice. ‘Bishop is – or was – a really nasty character, someone we’ve been after for a very long time. Society is better off without him. I’m just sorry he’s turned up here, and in such a distressing way. Although,’ he added, regarding me with interest, ‘you do seem to have maintained your composure.’

Just then a constable stuck his head round the door to say

forensics had arrived. St Regis asked us to wait. He said he would be back soon to interview us and examine the crime scene in more detail. *About ten minutes*, he said, and left.

Everyone started to talk at once. I quieted them sternly, and turned back to Jacqueline, 'What do you mean, you know who did this?'

She pushed her glasses back on the bridge of her nose. 'It's self-evident. From the lack of blood, it's clear that Bishop wasn't actually murdered here. Nobody broke into the library, so he must have been laid out, as it were, by someone with a key. All of you have keys. So it must be one of you, or the cleaners. And judging by their reaction this morning, it wasn't the cleaners. The question, then, is which of you put him here, and why.'

'But Jacqueline...' I began.

'I prefer to be called Jaxx,' said Jacqueline. 'With a double "x". Now let me continue.'

'Jacqueline, I mean Jaxx, why would any of us want to do this? What possible motive could we have?'

'Miss Lustre, Eleanor, you really don't have time to keep interrupting me.' She was right. I conceded the floor.

'As for motive,' she continued, 'you each have a perfectly good motive for wanting Bishop out of the way. None of you wants the Club to stop, because it's making a lot of money. That applies specially to you, Eleanor. You've been in charge of the Book Club's finances. And your bank statements show that you profit far more than the others, who are supposed to be equal partners...'

'But – but how did you...? You know about the Club? And my bank statements...?'

Jaxx rolled her eyes. 'Oh, *please*. Honestly! When I got here, you were all so weird, always whispering in corners. Running downstairs. And taking naps. So I hacked your email accounts and one thing led to another. Whatever. Yes, Eleanor, you must have been pretty worried when Bishop's men cornered you, not just about losing the Club but about being caught with your hand in the till. Two strong motives, right there.'

'But why would I cut the body up and put it in the library?'

'Exactly. That's the issue. I assume Bishop was murdered in the Club. It's got all the equipment. Whoever killed him moved him because they didn't want the Club discovered. But I know it wasn't you, Eleanor, because you would never have left him in the library. It had to be someone who not only wanted him gone but who thinks in a very particular way.'

Jacqueline looked at her watch. 'We need to hurry. Wayne, Bishop was blackmailing you. He knew that you and one of your customers, the one that comes in here with his family, are having an affair...'

'We're not *having an affair*,' wailed Wayne. 'We're *in love*!'

'Nevertheless, it means that you too had reason to want Bishop out of the way. Now you, Lynette, you were more difficult. No email record. And then I noticed your constant sniffing and trips to the ladies and realised you're hooked on cocaine. I suppose Bishop was your supplier?'

Lynette nodded. 'I've been wanting to give up,' she said, 'but he sent me a message saying that if I stopped buying, he'd let my ex-husband know and I'd lose access to my son. I have so little time with him as it is....' She pulled a tissue from her sleeve and blew her nose.

'Daisy,' said Jaxx, 'on the surface, you seem to be the only one without a motive. But your email shows you've been searching for your biological daughter. Last week, Community Services emailed to say they'd located her and you made an appointment to see them two days ago. Now, you would do anything to stop a new-found daughter knowing about your night job, wouldn't you? Bishop was threatening to expose you. So you killed him. Then you had to get him out of the Club but he was too big for you to handle on your own. So you chopped him up and moved him bit by bit.'

'But why put the pieces in the library?'
'That,' said Jaxx, 'is how I realised who the killer was. Didn't you notice? All the pieces are shelved according to Dewey. The torso at 611, Anatomy. The leg at 74.6, Running. The head at 364.66, Capital Punishment. It had to be someone for whom shelving was second nature.' She pointed at Daisy. 'My shelving teacher. You were on duty last night, weren't you?' Daisy nodded. She no longer seemed anxious. Instead she looked relieved, almost happy.

'I still don't understand why there was a whip in his hand,' I said.

'The whip? He was probably holding it when he died.'

We all looked at Daisy. 'Is this true?' I asked. 'Yes it is,' she said. 'He barged in last night,' she said. 'I was alone. He threatened me in the vilest language. His face was blood-red. He hit me, hard. I fell back, right on top of my Taser. Good thing you insisted on safety measures, Eleanor. When he picked up a whip and raised it to strike me again I Tasered him. He fell down, writhed about for a bit and lay still. He didn't have a pulse – I killed him with the Taser, I think. So I changed out of my fishnets and heels and dragged him onto one of the rubber sheets. And went to work.'

'It's the end, then,' I said. 'If you confess, they'll have to know why you did it, and where. If you don't, they'll find the Club when they search.'

'I think I should confess, don't you?' said Daisy. 'But before I do, there's something I want to say.' She smoothed her skirt. 'You were right, Jaxx. I have been looking for my biological daughter, my beautiful girl. I was sixteen when she was born and they made me – they made me give her up. But I know who she is now.' Daisy looked at Jaxx. 'You were adopted, weren't you?' Jaxx nodded. She had gone paler than I thought possible.

'My little girl.' Daisy said, holding out her arms. 'I'm proud of you!'

'Mother?' Jaxx hesitated a moment before hugging Daisy back, first hesitantly, then fiercely. 'Mother! I've been waiting for you my whole life!'

At that moment the door opened and St Regis entered. He surveyed the scene. 'So,' he said. 'Anything I should know?'

Daisy untangled Jaxx and started forward but I held up my hand. ‘Inspector,’ I said, ‘could we speak in private?’

In my office I told him everything. I held nothing back, not even my financial sleight of hand. And to my horror, by the end, I found tears running down my cheeks. I haven’t cried since I was a young girl. St Regis offered a snow-white handkerchief and an instant later I found myself sobbing in his arms. The man’s chest was like a brick wall.

I recovered fairly quickly but found myself loath to move. I looked up at him. ‘Inspector...’ He placed a finger on my lips.

‘Shh.’ He said. ‘Now, now. This is very interesting. We knew all about the Book Club, of course...’

‘You did?’ I extricated myself. ‘And did nothing about it?’

‘We felt that since none of you engaged in other criminal activity we could let it pass. Besides, we were hoping it would force Bishop’s hand, flush him out.’

‘So we were your...’ I searched for the word. ‘Your *sitting ducks*?’ I was indignant. ‘But that’s positively dangerous!’

He had the grace to look ashamed. ‘The word you want is *decoy*. I admit we should have kept more of a watch. We might have intervened last night. But on the other hand, Bishop is dead. That’s not a bad outcome. And he had a heart condition, you know. I’ll have a word to the pathologist, who might well determine death by natural causes.’

‘And the...the dismemberment?’

‘He shrugged. We’ll think of something.’

I started to cry again, a little, this time from relief and happiness. ‘Are you sure? Why are you doing this? Tell me!’

He took my hands in his. ‘I admit, there is something I would like...’

‘Anything, anything,’ I replied, my heart racing. ‘What is it?’ ‘I have for some time been wanting to visit the Book Club,’ he said, ‘to make an appointment with someone there, someone they talk about, the one they call *Miss Châteline*. You?’

I nodded, modestly. ‘Any time at all,’ I whispered. ‘On the house.’ And we went to tell the others.

Things have changed since then. The Club still operates, though with different staff. Wayne and his lover married, and live, in Canada. Lynette and Daisy are still connected with the venture, as administrators. So am I but in an advisory capacity only. I gave up my night job to serve just one client, and you can guess who. Perry St Regis (Lord St Regis, as it turns out) and I have an unconventional relationship, but it works.

Jaxx, however, has wrought the greatest change. Like her mother, she proved a natural librarian. She took control of the Club. She sorted out the finances. She visited neighbouring libraries and suggested franchises. Before we knew it, a chain of Book Clubs had opened in suburbs and towns across the state and then across the country. Police protection helps.

We still don’t advertise. However, when next you visit your local library, and you should, ask if you can join the Book Club. They’ll understand.

Natalie Conyer

Natalie Conyer has loved books and reading all her life but it wasn't until three years ago that she decided to chuck in a sensible corporate career and try her hand at writing. Now she works as a freelance writer-editor and is feeding her obsession with crime by doing a Doctor of Creative Arts degree, in South African crime fiction, at the University of Western Sydney.