

THE TIGHTROPE, By Richard Davies

THE TIGHTROPE Part One

Barmen have a sixth sense for trouble. You need it if you work someplace like Hank's down by the bus station. I went in there after work most days, so I knew something was up when Jimmy gave me an odd look as he poured my beer and chaser.

'You know a guy named Adams?' He held his hand out in front of his stomach. 'Looks like he should miss a few dinners....'

I shook my head. I'd been working late and was tired. The last thing I wanted was company.

'He was here with another guy. Asking for you.'

He poured a whiskey and set it beside my beer. 'They had a mug shot. Very ugly!'

'Maybe I parked in the wrong place and the sheriff has his men out.' I downed the whiskey and signalled for another. I reached into my pants pocket for loose bills. I took out a pile, peeled one off, and tossed it on the bar. Just doing it made me feel good. I might be a clerk in a car rental company, but I had money.

'You in trouble bud?' Jimmy poured the whiskey again, only more slowly, and although he didn't look up, I knew he was waiting for my answer.

'So far as I know...no way.' 'That doesn't entirely answer....' But he let it go. Someone was calling for a refill.

The whiskey burnt my throat so I started in on the beer. It was cool and sour and tasted good. Maybe I'm not the brightest guy in the world, but my mind was working through the possibilities. Who could it be? What did they want? There had been that loan a few years back, nothing big but the letters kept coming as the interest rolled up. And there was that bitch with the two kids who said she had another coming and named me as its father. More likely it was the repro guys about the payments on my car.

Or it could be... but some areas are off limits even to one's private thoughts. They're the memories and fears that stalk in the early hours, or spring up like jack-in-a-boxes on idle sunny days when everything seems fine and safe. They're not for the working day, or the happy hour that leads to the solitary meal and the empty evening.

Jimmy came back. He was wiping his hands on his apron and swaying a little as he always did when he wasn't happy. 'Over there. In the booth by the door.' I could see who he meant. And he was right to be worried. They didn't look like nice people.

'If you want the rear door, just duck under the counter, and don't look back.' Jimmy turned away and went to fix the TV at the far end of the bar. Jimmy was a good man, and so was his advice, and I should have taken it, but as I've said, I'm not the world's brightest guy. I was prepared to bet myself they were only after the loan, or my car. As an outside chance... the girl with the baby... I walked towards them.

It was a small place, just a bar along one side with booths opposite. The place was almost empty. The smell of reheated chilli hung in the steamy air as I passed the food counter. One of the guys had his back to me, but the fat one was watching. I didn't bother looking. If they wanted me they could come and get me. I pushed open the door and went out into the chill November dark. After about thirty paces I could hear them behind me. Too late to run, and no point in pretending. The time for all that was over. I felt a gloved hand under my shirt collar, and heard a wheezing voice, and in an instant all my delusions were gone. I knew damn well who they were, and what they were after. My time was up.

The first thing they do is flog you. And the SP is so cool about it. It's like they're asking to take your coat in a restaurant. Everyone is polite and businesslike. No shouting or cursing; no name calling. Just 'come this way' and 'you won't need your shirt' and 'stand over by the frame' and 'raise your arms and spread your legs.'

There was a delay. One whip-master was going off duty and his relief hadn't arrived. Heavy traffic. So someone said they would check whether one of the guys just back from patrol duty would be willing to step in. The alternative was a long wait. The punishment chamber was spick and span, with white walls, brilliant fluorescent lights, a large mirror for one-way viewing, whips of all sizes hung in rows along one wall, and a pair of state of the art whipping frames made of gleaming stainless steel. After a few minutes a uniformed young officer came in. He was very much in the SP mould - sharp hair-cut, crisp shirt, neat tie, regular features, light brown hair, trim body, a slender butt and an enviable bulge at the front of his well-cut black pants. He asked a whole lot of questions as he tried out various whips. Who was I? Why was I there? How many lashes? Had the duty medical officer been informed? When he was satisfied he came up close and checked the ropes and shackles. He smelt of cologne and was half whistling under his breath.

I told myself it would be over in ten minutes, but I knew it might just as well be ten years. Time under the lash is not like time spent waiting for a bus. Pain slows everything, and the bullwhip is a lazy instrument. It needs to be gathered, coiled, cracked, aimed and landed. A flogging can seem like an eternity and the pain takes on a life of its own, colonising every nerve and muscle, spreading its tentacles through every limb and every inch of your skin. You think you will pass out, but you don't; and then you think your bones will break. Suddenly you're sure you can get them to stop, but

you can't; and then you try to retreat inside yourself, and tell yourself the pain is levelling off, but it doesn't. And you've only had ten lashes. You think you're going to die, and you prepare to give up whatever ghost may lurk inside you, but nothing happens, and the pain gets worse and worse.

How can a body take so much? And there are still twenty lashes to go. But if time is cruel, it also brings things to their end. There was a shout that the punishment was concluded, and some admiring comments about technique, along with cheerful banter among the spectators. With clatter and a roar, buckets were filled and water was chucked over me, and the officer was back breathing on my neck as he checked his handiwork.

There was Friday night talk about going off-duty and meeting up for a drink. The lights were dimmed and the shackles removed. A voice reminded someone to put me on the list for castration. A rookie officer appeared in the doorway to say there was a lady at the front desk with a slave she wanted flogged. 'Tell her how much it'll cost,' said the officer who'd whipped me. 'That'll get rid of her.' He laughed as he coiled and knotted the whip and hung it on the wall. He said he was going to get a shower.

A blunt-faced overseer from the SP barracks took my arm. He was dressed in dark red overalls and boots with thick rubber soles. As we moved towards the door he tripped me. Before my face reached the ground his boot had gone into my balls. When I tried to stand he gave me a rabbit punch, and then blackened my left eye. He stood back and looked me up and down. 'That's enough for now,' he said cheerfully, 'there's some one wants a word with you.'

The interrogation room was windowless and no wider than a corridor. There was a door at either end - one for the interrogator, the other leading to the slave cells. The walls were painted grey and streaked with stains and splatters of blood. The floor was dirty and scattered with discarded paper cups, cigar butts, coke cans, used tissues and rolled-up newspapers. The guard threw me in and I tried to break my fall with my left hand, but it skidded in a puddle of urine. My face fell in the piss and my nostrils filled with its stale acrid scent.

When the interrogator came in he threw a switch and the lights changed. Out went the overhead bulbs, and on came a couple of fierce spotlights embedded low in the wall on either side of the door. 'You look like you need tidying up.' The voice was pleasant, educated, and sounded reasonable and only slightly ironic. How many pairs of balls had its owner busted that day? 'But not to worry...later.'

I raised my head; half expecting a boot to land on my nose, but the man was still at the far end of the room. With the lights behind him I couldn't see much of him, but I made out a tall slim figure in shirtsleeves, hands on hips, a full head of hair. The SP had gone very preppy; he was probably a college boy from a good family, who just happened to enjoy using his fists and boots. After a few years spent whipping and torturing he would meet some nice girl and settle down, with excellent references to help him find a well

paid job in the service sector. 'We're going to geld you. You know that?' I nodded. There was phlegm in my throat. With an elegant step forwards, and a slight twist of his torso to the left, he used his right foot to kick me in the face. The force came from his knee and had enough follow-through to send my head back, making my neck bones crackle like broken twigs. 'Be so good as to answer my questions.'

I brought my head forwards and spat the phlegm on the floor. I managed to mutter a 'yes sir.'

'That's better.' He walked past me to the far end of the cell. 'Lets get those lights out of your eyes.' I turned to look at him. My face was burning and blood and snot were dribbling from my nose. My hands were slick with urine and my back was on fire. My left eye was losing its battle to stay open. From the way I was shivering I was running a fever of over a hundred. Now that he was in the full glare of the lights I got a good look. His white shirt was unbuttoned and fitted close to his tapering torso. There was no flab on his stomach, and he wore plain dark pants. He had his hands in his pockets and was looking down at me. His face was pale, with full red lips on a small mouth, and his brown hair was curly. He must have been a cherubic boy.

'I could help you.' He spoke softly, as if uncertain whether to go on. 'But there's probably no point...' He pulled his left hand from his pocket and looked at his watch. 'I really ought to be elsewhere.' He frowned down at me and let his hand fall back in his pocket. 'Do you want to hear what I've got to say, or would you rather I sent you off to be cleaned up? Your decision.'

'Please sir... tell me sir.' My voice was faint. Blood was dripping from my upper lip.

'Does the name Frank Strauch mean anything?'

'A slave dealer. In Hawkstown.'

'Go on.'

'Dodgy imports... unregistered mostly. For special use.'

'You know him well?'

'We've done business.' There was a pain in my chest, and a spasm along my spine, and a gob of spittle on my tongue. 'Yeah, I know him.'

'Your lucky day.' He sounded pleased, very pleased. 'We may need your help. You will be straight with us, won't you?'

This time I'd sensed what was coming. A part of me was alive again, and I raised my arms and used my hands to protect me. He took the same step, and a half skip, and his boot got through my defence, but the blow was broken, and the leather sole only

loosened one of my front teeth. He paused over me and smiled down, and then walked to his end of the cell and punched a bell by the door. It opened at once. 'Get him cleaned up and bring him to my office at ten in the morning. Make sure he's not cut.' He turned and pointed a finger at me. 'You're going to need every ounce of your balls.'

The officer came in. Against the light I could only see the boots and uniform and the outline of a shaved head. 'No use kicking your butt... on your feet.' He stood back while I struggled off the floor, then he shackled my wrists and ankles and attached the chain to one on his belt. It seemed a long way to the 'Recovery Unit.' An orderly hosed me down, painted my wounds, and put me in a cell with three other slaves who had been under torture. I was injected with something that killed my fever and let me sleep. It must have been a very deep sleep, because I had no dreams, and when I woke there was daylight outside, and the other slaves had been removed. There was a slave collar round my neck.

THE TIGHTROPE PART TWO

My father sold me into slavery when I was sixteen. It was a set-up between him and the SP. I'd been caught stealing once too often and the courts were sure to enslave me for a few years. My dad was looking to retire and saw no reason why he shouldn't benefit from my sale. The SP wanted a chance to show their brutal side after a series of slave riots. The deal was the civilian police would hold off while dad sold me at auction. After that the SP would move in and make an example of me.

I was taken back to my old high school and paraded before the assembled student body. After being held up as a bad example to the nation's youth, I was put in shackles and blinkers, and made to carry a whipping frame to the gym. The students lined my route to mock me. To make the spectacle a little more intense they placed lead weights round my ankles and fixed a microphone close to my mouth so my pleas and curses would be heard by all. The SP brought in a professional whip-master who had me muzzled after the first dozen lashes. My screams were ruining his concentration.

After the fun was over the SP delivered me to the family who had bought me. The Cerinis were simple decent folk and they treated me like one of the family. Like them, I had to work hard and for long hours, but they were never cruel. If only I had repaid them with loyalty and respect. But I've always had a dishonest streak and the Cerinis trusted me too much. I began to steal money from my master's pockets as I hung up his clothes. When I went to collect goods from the downtown stores, and stood in line at the slave counter, I would look out for other slaves who were up to no good. They weren't hard to spot. And the money I kept hidden up my anus came in handy in making contacts. I soon had all the drugs and cheap wine I craved, and was dealing in pills and all the other illegal merchandise slaves fall prey to when they have access to money.

Before long I met a slave who was 'king of the rackets' and he told me that if I gave him a large enough sum in cash he would supply me with the address of an empty house

where there were rich pickings to be found. If I did well he could smuggle me to a place where they knew how to remove slave collars, and fake IDs, and provide a runaway with a new identity.

Did I have what it took to tread such an audacious and dangerous path? I never doubted it. I felt no pang of shame or betrayal when I plundered the Cerini's safe and ran off with their savings. Being good people they didn't raise the alarm for six hours and by then I was breaking into a house to steal again. I must have given the wretched 'king of the rackets' enough to buy his freedom ten times over. And I got mine.

Ruffians fetched me and shackled my arms and legs and placed a hood over my head and drove me for hours and then locked me in a coal cellar for a day and a half. After that they hid me under bags of garbage in the back of a pick-up and drove me to some hovel in a wood. I was made to stand close to heat and felt rough fingers on my neck, and then a terrible burning. I passed out but when I came to my collar was gone. I was hustled into the back of a car and driven to a cheap motel. They took me into a room, put on the TV, ordered in a meal and gave me a change of clothing. Then they handed over an envelope containing directions to the railhead, some money and my new name. They wished me luck and left.

That was eight years ago. I travelled south and found clerical work. I paid my taxes and joined a church for a while. I did my best to live a respectable life, but there's always easy money to be made around the edges of the slave trade. I liked easy money. It felt warmer in my pockets and I spent it without regret. It wasn't long before I was hanging out with freelance bounty hunters, illicit traders, and guys who would do more or less anything to pay for their fast women and sharp suits. The truth was I felt at home with them, and despised my fellow clerks with their dim, honest lives and their sad-eyed wives. But I still worked my shifts renting cars to travelling salesmen and tourists. I wore my company uniform and smiled as I duplicated customers' credit card details, and ran checks to make sure they weren't runaways.

As every school kid knows, the SP captures runaways in the end. They flog and castrate them and sell them on the wholesale market to be picked up cheap by the whip-clubs, pain brothels, slave-fight promoters, and the pharmaceutical conglomerates. Increased demand from the automobile industry for slaves to be used in accident prevention experiments had raised prices for runaways at auction. Life expectancy was mercifully short. So I knew the SP would be offering me nothing nice in return for keeping my balls.

When I was led into an interview room that morning there was no doubt about what was at stake. I was naked except for the collar with a chain attached that ran down to a ring round my balls. This was tight enough to ensure an erection, and a bulging scrotum. A clamp on my right nipple had a tag attached with the words 'to be gelded' on one side and a blank space for a signature on the other. My wrists were cuffed high behind my back and kept in place by another chain fixed to the back of my collar. For good measure there was a plug up my butt and a pair of blinkers over my eyes.

All I could make out of the room was a table with three men sitting behind it. One was my age and wearing a SP officer's uniform, another was middle-aged and wearing a tweed suit, and the third was a trim thirty something with a droopy moustache wearing a green polo shirt. A wooden platform was placed on my side of the table and I was led forward and told to kneel on it. An overseer in SP fatigues stood behind me to my left with a short leather whip drawn and ready for use. I dared not imagine what it would feel like against my swollen, throbbing back.

The deal on offer was simple. The officer in the SP uniform explained that Frank Strauch was in the market for slaves, and he preferred soiled good because he could get them cheap. If the price were right he would buy me. I was to use my association with him to glean information about his illegal slave deals, and report back. If I got enough for the SP to arrest and convict Strauch, they would see I was sold on to a gentle owner. If I did really well they might consider freeing me. If I did badly they would wash their hands of the whole business. Strauch's reputation ensured that would be punishment enough.

I muttered my assent. The man in the polo shirt got up and came round to stand beside me. He was wearing camouflage fatigue pants and the bracelet of the SP Special Actions Brigade. He cupped my chin in his hand and raised my face so that my eyes met his. They were a chilly light blue. His jaw line was firm and his lips thin under a thick moustache. His nostrils were a little dilated and he spoke with a local drawl. 'With or without you, we'll nail Strauch. But if you betray us, you'll see the inside of Flint Hill Camp. Do you understand?'

I gulped a 'yes sir' and lowered my eyes. Flint Hill was the SP's special prison, a one-way ticket to hell. The man let go of my chin. He stood behind me. I heard him sigh and then he kicked me up my backside so hard I shot forwards and upward and landed face down with my chest on the table. The man in the check suit leaned forwards and used the palm of his hand on my face to push me off. I fell in a heap on the floor. The pain from my flogging pulsated through my system and for a moment I could not move. A cut across my legs with the overseer's whip got me on my feet. He grabbed me by the chain linking my collar to my balls and pulled on it hard enough to get me following him out of the room like an obedient dog.

Strauch bought me four days later. His only stipulation, given the reasonable price, was proof that I had not been a runaway. The SP said that I had been enslaved for two years on suspicion of illicit slave dealing, and that they had thought the judge too lenient, and had therefore taken it upon themselves to even up the scales of justice with the whip and their toe-caps. My swollen balls swinging beneath my bruised cock offered the proof. As everyone knew, runaways were gelded without exception.

Strauch had me delivered to his home, a rambling clapboard place beside a lake with outhouses scattered along its private shore. Although just outside town, it had the remote desolate feel of a place where a man could live by his own rules and in defiance of those who would impose petty restrictions on his manhood. When he saw me

shackled, with a collar round my neck, wearing slave sandals and a plain smock with a pair of tattered work-shorts, he roared with laughter. I was standing in the yard and he came out onto his porch to take a look. A couple of his slaves stood grinning like idiots and I tried my best to maintain a dignified front, but that's not easy when your nose is dribbling and you're fighting the need to shit.

'Settle him in, and then bring him to me.' Strauch roared again and went inside.

Strauch was not your average illicit dealer. There was nothing shabby about him, and he seemed to have emerged from a time warp. His most striking feature was a pair of very long legs and a narrow face dominated by a prominent nose and rather too close dark brown eyes. He wore his hair slicked back, and so close to his scalp he was often thought to be bald. His style of dress was gentlemanly to the point of being foppish, with stiff collars, three-piece suits, tweeds for the weekend, a Borsalino, and fine riding boots. He wore a fob watch, club ties with a silver pin, handmade shirts with French cuffs, and sported fine handkerchiefs of richly patterned silk or snowy white linen. None of which blunted his aura of brutality. There was the thick neck and hunch in his shoulders, a habit of forming fists in his pockets, a stillness, and above all a vulpine expression. He combined that grace of movement that comes with confidence and dominance, with a lean athleticism and a sense of barely contained energy eager for release.

I reported to him in his gunroom. There was a black Labrador at his feet and black slave attending him, who was stripped to the waist to reveal a powerful physique. Master and slave were examining a twin bore shot gun, and as I stood in the doorway waiting to be recognised I could hear them absorbed in a relaxed but entirely unequal conversation. The dog saw me, and the slave jumped when he looked round.

Strauch frowned and dismissed the slave, who dropped to his knees and kissed his master's hand before rising and leaving. He passed me without meeting my eye. 'Come closer.' Strauch picked up the gun again and took aim against a target on the wall. 'What strange fates the gods organise for us.' I muttered something in agreement; making sure the word 'master' was audible.

'Always speak clearly. And strip. I want to take a look at you.' He spoke in the crisp monotone of a man whose authority has never been challenged. Slave clothes are easily removed. I slipped the smock over my head and pushed down my shorts and stepped out of them. There was the whiff of machine oil and cordite in the air. The dog came over and sniffed me. Strauch examined me as he might any piece of property. He ran a hand over my chest, tugged my nipples, felt my testicles and declared them healthy, expressed dismay at the state of my back, and said my legs were in a dismal state. He examined my mouth and commented on the deplorable state of my teeth. 'Are you a virgin?'

'Yes master.'

'I'll bear it in mind, but I'm not fucking anything so soft and flabby. See to it you exercise two hours a day. I'll have another look at you in a month and if you've not hardened and toughened I'll send you to be trained. Do you understand?'

'Yes master.'

'I'm putting you in charge of the vehicles. If they aren't clean, fuelled, serviced and ready for use, I'll be flogging your hide.'

'Yes master.'

He put down the gun. 'You'll drive me now and then.'

He placed a hand on my shoulder. 'We always understood each other as free men, didn't we?'

'Yes master.'

'Things have changed. You'll do well to trim your understanding in those matters that might turn dangerous. Your duty is to serve and obey; pay no heed to the rights or wrongs of my life.' He dropped his hand. 'On your knees slave.'

I dropped as quickly as I knew how, but not fast enough. He struck me on the back of my head and swore. 'Kiss my hand, my feet, my dick and my butt.' My lips felt strange against the back of his dry salty hand. I crouched to kiss his feet. I'd seen it done often enough and had always found the spectacle amusing, with the slave's butt stuck up in the air, and his face buried in shoe-leather. It felt absurd. His long legs meant I did not have to bend to kiss his dick. He had me rub my face against the stiffening coil inside the pants, and then unbutton him and nestle my nose and mouth into his boxers until my lips found his cock. I no more than kissed the tip peeping from its sheaf before Strauch turned and I found myself pressing my lips against his right butt-cheek and then his left and then between.

As I did so he dropped his pants and boxers. I edged my nose into the crack. The butt was covered in hair and it smelt mossy and dank. Further inside the crack it smelt of expensive soap mixed with putrid shit. 'Tongue me.' I was aware of him picking up a gun and aiming it, and of the dog beside me, sniffing and yawning. And then another voice, clearly a slave, and Strauch answering and laughing. I opened my mouth and slid my tongue between the warm soft cheeks towards the anus. There was a dilute of shit on my nose and tongue. I knew I had found my target when my lick produced a shudder of pleasure. I repeated it. A hand smacked against the side of my head brought my first encounter with Strauch's anus to an end. I rose and hung my head, waiting for instructions.

'Go to your duties.'

I grabbed my clothes, bowed and walked to the door. Another slave, young and handsome and also stripped to the waist, stood in the doorway with a briefcase in his hands. Our eyes met as I passed and he allowed himself a glimmer of a smile.

I spent the rest of the day washing and cleaning the cars and pick-ups. I worked hard and was sweating freely when Strauch appeared shortly before dinner-time. He nodded approval when he saw the progress I had made and told me to report to him at ten. We would need a fast pick-up and a full tank of gas. I would be driving and we would be out all night. If I needed drugs to keep myself awake I should get them from the housekeeper. If I fell asleep at the wheel he would hobble my ankles. 'I've done it before. Ask the slaves about Old Cord.' He gave me a meaningful stare and went off.

A raggedly slave boy, who had been helping me, rolled his eyes with relief and said his butt was usually on fire after a visit from the master. 'He can be very cruel, but he likes you.' He grinned and ran off, telling me not to forget my dinner.

THE TIGHTROPE, Part Three

I soon learned where Strauch was getting his money. Each night we'd set off before midnight and take the highway twenty miles east, and then along local roads for an hour and finally turn onto the dirt tracks that led into the hills. This was lawless territory and we went armed and prepared for action. I drove with Strauch beside me and a skinny slave called Rado crouching behind the seat. A fierce old slave called Squinty rode on the back with a couple of hunting dogs. We always had plenty of whips, lassoes and ammunition for the shotguns.

And what was the purpose of these nocturnal journeys? To rendezvous with various odd parties who had runaways to sell, or some kidnapped slave registered as a runaway, or a criminal on the loose from prison. Strauch was buying and selling illegals. It was exciting work. No point in pretending I didn't enjoy myself bundling the slaves in the back to be gagged and bound. It beat hiring out cars any day.

And if I had to be a slave, Strauch was the man to have for a master. No question he was sinister, and quick to use his whip, but he liked to laugh and talk with his slaves, and saw no reason to hold himself aloof and never ask our advice or share a joke. He was quite prepared to eat a burger in the evening with the slave he had beaten in the morning. But his relaxed view of the give and take between master and slave went hand in hand with a robust approach to discipline. I soon learned that the slightest mistake was reason enough for him to have me to kneel while he ripped the shirt off my back and flogged me with his dog-whip. He took it for granted that no slave would resent such treatment. At the same time he had respect for work done well, and for those of his slaves he could depend on. He never thanked us, but he didn't have to; it was enough for us that he expected everything to be in good order.

To begin with I received my share of bruises and whip-marks but soon got on top of my workload, and had the vehicles in good order, and ready for use, fuelled and

polished. I never fell asleep at the wheel, or drove off the road, and we never ran out of gas or had the engine fail. I might be covered in grease and smell like an oil sump, but I was a real slave. I lost weight and my body hardened; my thoughts became more focused on my work and my master, and I lived from day to day. In the background there was always the threat and fear of the whip, but even that had its reassuring side. It meant there was no alternative to hard work.

If only that had been all there was to my life. Slavery is not such a bad existence, but it demands simple lines of respect and obedience. No slave can serve more than one master. So what were my chances of survival? Strauch was demanding enough, but the SP would make it their business to demand more than I could give. It would suit their book to milk me of information and then toss me to the dogs. It was the way they operated. They made their first move after about three months.

I had almost forgotten them, but early one morning down at the filling station I was chatting to the slave pumping gas when an unmarked SP car drew up. I knew at once what it was; it was the combination of the car's anonymity and the special swagger of the young man who got out and stretched himself. Only graduates of the SP Academy moved that way. Any free man can demand service before a slave, or may interrupt where a slave is being served.

The plainclothes SP man walked over and snapped his fingers at the slave I was talking to. A slave knows trouble when he sees it, and he immediately hung up my pump and went to fill the SP car. The officer came round and told me to present myself for an ID check. I stood legs two feet apart, chest out, butt out, head bowed. He took his ID swipe off his belt and grabbed me by my collar. The checks only took a few seconds. He had difficulty reading the results, but they seemed to be in order because he nodded. In his freshly laundered jeans and casual shirt and leather jacket, he might have been any young man on his way to work. He was even attractive in a quiet way, with a pleasing contrast between his blue eyes, a snub nose, neatly trimmed fair hair, and the muscular shoulders and butt on powerful rather short legs.

'Get in the car.' My stomach dropped. Could he be my SP contact? More likely he was just a bored SP on his way into work who felt like some sport before a dull day behind a desk. No slave hesitates to obey the SP. I got into the back of the car and heard the officer tell the slave pumping the gas to make himself scarce. There was a second officer sitting in the front. All I could see of him was a thick neck and close-shaved black hair.

I muttered a respectful 'good morning sir' but got no response. The door beside me opened and the first officer got in. I scrambled sideways to give him room. Before I knew what was happening he had grabbed hold of my wrist and jerked it up behind me so I turned on my side. He took the other wrist and bound them with plastic cord. He told me to sit back and place my feet against the back of the front seat. He tapped his colleague on the shoulder. 'Give us the tabs.' The officer in the front reached down and

picked up some wires with electrodes. They were attached to a small unit on the dashboard. I knew all too well what it was. My gut was turning to water.

'Officer sir, I need to take a shit, sir.'

The guy in front laughed as he flicked some switches. 'I bet he does.' The one beside me sighed. 'Shut the fuck up and open your shirt.'

The pressure in my bowel was matched by a terrible sweaty fear. I'd never had electric torture myself but I'd used it a few times on slaves' testicles when they'd been suspected of stealing from hired cars. The necessary confession had always been extracted within minutes. I remember playing around with it, and placing the pads against my thumbs and just flicking the switch a fraction. The pain had sent me reeling. The officer beside me cleaned the pads by rubbing them against his thigh. Then he squirted some gel on my nipples and attached the pads. A tingling sensation ran through my chest. It made me laugh involuntarily.

'Glad you like it,' said the officer. 'Lets try it with some juice.' He turned the switch and a sickening flame of pain shot through my chest. It seemed to spin away and then recoil and concentrate on the nipples until it exploded again and went through me. I felt paralysed. It only lasted a couple of seconds but I burst into a sweat. It was the officer's turn to grin and laugh. 'Beats kicking butt.'

I did my best to answer their questions. I knew they'd want every last detail, and that they had the means to sluice from my mind any secrets, so I sang like a bird. I felt doubly sick - sick with fear of pain and sick with a sense of degradation. Odd as it might sound, I hated betraying Strauch; at least he was a man, while these well-bred SP animals were garbage. But I told them everything. I got five doses of 'the juice' and in the end the gas from my bowel was so noxious the officer tore the pads off and threw me out. I ran to the slave toilets and squatted over the hole and let the liquid shit run out of me like my guilt and shame. My nipples scorched dry and discoloured. I hosed myself down and went back to where the pick-up was parked.

The officers were waiting, lounging against the side of their car with eager smiles. I knew I was for it. The SP are always quick and efficient, especially in public. It's a matter of professional pride to subdue a slave in seconds and then add sufficient punishment to leave any spectator impressed, and the slave with an enduring sense of terror. But they went easy on me. I stood before them, head bowed while they whispered that if I had held back any information they would come after me and give me a 'special' beating.

Then to ensure I was 'good' they had me lie face down on the tarmac. My interrogator reached into his hip pocket for a short length of rhino hide and criss-crossed my back with a dozen cuts. Then it was the turn of the other officer. He kicked me over on my back and pressed the sole of his boot into my face just hard enough to provide me with a nosebleed.

Back at the yard I told the other slaves I'd run into the SP. It was explanation enough. Strauch noticed my bloody nose and the fresh marks on my back, but he said nothing. Masters don't comment on their slaves' bruises and blisters. Like all Strauch's slaves I worked stripped to the waist. It was not just a matter of the climate; even in the cold we would exercise to work up a sweat and stoke up the yard fires to keep warm. There's a sense of comradeship to be found in working bare-chested. A slave who has been flogged need not hide the fact, and one with a skinny torso will work hard to deepen his chest and toughen up. And slaves with no marks will accept the inevitable when the time comes for him to take his licks.

At night we slept in bunkhouses and fucked each other rigid, but only those who had already lost their virginity. Unbroken holes were the property of the master, and in the end he always picked his cherries, although he gathered those on younger slaves first. He took mine one Saturday night. I had driven him downtown to watch a slave-fight.

A large crowd had turned out in the car park behind a liquor store. The free men stood close while slaves went round collecting bets. Slaves in attendance with their masters hung back lest their masters decide after a few beers too many to see how his slave might fare with his fists. Even so it was good sport and we slaves cheered on our favourites as keenly as the free men did theirs. There was much surreptitious handing round of cheap wine and smokes. When one fight went to ten rounds we emptied our pockets of our few coins to bet on the local boy, and when he won we rushed forwards and raised him on our shoulders.

Afterwards I drove Strauch home, stopping along the way to drag him out so he could take a piss. I had to unbutton him and find his cock and I got his hot piss all over my hands, and he thought that funny. As we drove on we got to talking about the fighters, and soon I was caught up in the discussion and forgot my place by disputing something Strauch said. He slapped my face and told me to remind him in the morning to whip my hide. Back at the house I helped him out of the car while his body-slaves came running. He fell against me, and his hand ran down my chest over my right nipple. He looked up at me as if he had never seen me before, then steadied himself and allowed his slaves to lead him in.

But I had seen the look in his eyes, and was not surprised when a slave came running down to the yard half an hour later to say the master wanted me up at the main house.

It's a strange thing to be fucked by one's master. Nothing out of the ordinary, of course, but the first time is an occasion to remember, like the first time with a girl, or with a slave who sucks your cock. Strauch didn't fuck his male slaves in his bed. He had females to share that. Rather he took his males in his dressing room. This was a pair of alcoves off to one side adjacent to the bathroom. The walls were high and lined with rosewood chests of drawers spilling with linen, and deep closets full of clothes that only his valet-slaves could count or sort. There were two sofas covered with loose Turkish rugs, and an easy chair as well as three full length free standing mirrors. A dressing table was cluttered with bottles of cologne and lotions, and the space was lit by a series of

small lamps positioned to show off the master in the best light. The polished oak floor creaked with every footstep. I was to get to know it well.

But that night I was led up to the bedroom by a snooty house-slave who took exception to my smelly state. I had to contain an urge to kick his fat flabby butt; if our master wanted me filthy, who was he to turn up his nose? We reached the bedroom by narrow backstairs that came out in the room itself. The scene dazzled me after so long in Spartan surroundings. The wood-panelled walls were covered in tapestries and paintings, and the dark polished floor was littered oriental rugs. There were vases filled with roses and bowls spilling violets. The air was thickened with some incense.

I was taken over to the four-poster bed where Strauch lay stretched out wearing a dark green silk dressing gown embroidered with the figures of gamecocks. A young male wearing only a golden night-cap and surgical gloves was cutting Strauch's toenails while another stood naked nearby with his arms above his head. His butt had been beaten to a deep even red - the consequence of an encounter with a paddle, an instrument never used on us yard-slaves, and that we despised as being suited only to soft domestics.

An elderly valet in formal dress was picking up clothes from the floor. Strauch looked me up and down as if I were a length of fabric he had ordered. 'That's the one...looks good. Take him through and prepare him... but don't wash him.' A black slave wearing only a blue silk cravat, two inch brass nipple rings and tight black pants was waiting for me in the dressing room. He had me strip and then lie on my back on a small trolley. My head was placed against the wall and my arms were stretched out behind me and attached to the handles of a chest of drawers. Then the black slave raised my legs up and parted until they could be roped to the chest of drawers higher up. In this way my butt hole was raised and exposed ready to be fucked. Every sinew and muscle was stretched. The slave used a paintbrush to grease my hole and placed a large silk handkerchief in my mouth. As he did so he held one of his own to his nose to fend off my smell. I felt like a turkey trussed for cooking and was left alone for about an hour.

My arms and hands went numb and there was too much weight on my shoulders. I lost feeling in my legs and couldn't breathe deeply through the gag. When Strauch finally appeared he was still wearing his gown, but with nothing under it. His long cock stuck out and his slim muscular torso seemed to gleam in the dim light. The black slave stood to one side holding a silver-topped cane, and the young slave in the gold nightcap was on the other side with a tray full of bottles of perfume. Strauch asked me if I were comfortable. I managed to say that I was. Strauch took the silver-topped cane and with an uncanny sense of aim deliver a stroke across my butt. Only a man who had been thrashing slaves since boyhood could have delivered such an accurate and painful stroke. It hurt as much as any whiplash. A second stroke was worse. In my anguish I must have started sweating heavily and despite the pain I could sense the acrid smell I was giving off.

The slave in the gold cap - he was erect now and had been fiddling with himself - poured some perfume onto a silk handkerchief and held it out for his master who took it and held it briefly under his nose before giving it back. Another stroke, and then Strauch turned and walked back into his bedroom, and then came at me running, with the cane high above his shoulder, and he cracked it down across my butt with a full easy swing that seemed almost to linger as Strauch used his arm to follow through. It was enough. He handed the cane to the black slave, making some remark about it being a bit stiff and in need of soaking, and then he had the other slave remove his dressing gown. I could see him standing over me. He was tall and slender with an elegant torso on top of his long legs. His cock was up and ready.

There was a pause while the black slave repainted my hole, and then Strauch stepped close and seemingly without help in guiding his cock, rammed it inside me. They say a rape is best endured without benefit of finesse or gentleness. That may be true, but the pain of being ripped open and a cock rammed inside was as intense as any cane stroke. It was as if I had become a vessel for all the pain my master could generate. And yet, as he set to work with deep thrusts and an even rhythm, sparks of pleasure began to flicker in the dark agony I endured. And with them came sensations that were neither pain nor pleasure, but rather pure feeling, as if my body had given up defining the shafts of feelings and was surrendering to them.

Strauch came with a deep groan of satisfaction and pulled himself out of me. His naked slave in the gold cap knelt and took the spouting cock in his mouth and eagerly swallowed his master's come, and then sucked so hard to gather every last drop, Strauch had to cuff him, and then led the slaves went back into the bedroom leaving me still bound, beaten, stuffed and gagged. It was half an hour before Strauch decided he was too tired for a second fuck and told the black slave to release me.

He let me find my own way back to the bunkhouse where I was greeted with cock-crows and farting noises. I made a big joke of it, and went to shit and shower. I told myself it was over, and that with any luck Strauch would not want a second helping from my butt. But by morning the word had spread that the master had been well pleased and that I would be called again. At the age of twenty five I was about to become a catamite.

TH TIGHTROPE, Part Four

I knew we were being followed. Of course I had tipped off the SP, and so was on the look-out, but it seemed so obvious, and yet Strauch and the other slaves never noticed the following lights as we drove home, or the parked trucks beside the dirt tracks. I think Strauch thought himself above disaster. He had been flattered by his slaves for too long, and had made too much easy money.

What surprised me was how long the SP held off. But, of course, unlike the civilian police who have to think of the victims of crime, and protect them, the SP can suit themselves. They wanted to stop Strauch, and knew they would need all the evidence

they could muster if they were to convict in a small community a man who was both well liked and feared. So they were content to stand by and watch as dozens of illicit slaves went to their ruin.

When they did make their move it came a surprise. We were buying three kidnapped slaves from a dirt farmer who had contacts in the city. Compared to most of the stock that came our way, they were in pretty good shape. There was a nerdy office slave who couldn't see without glasses, a black who had worked as a gardener in the city parks, and a chef who was making an early breakfast. Strauch and the farmer were standing on the porch drinking beers. It was still dark and the moon had set, and the only light came from the kitchen door. The dogs were alert and uneasy, but they had been all night. We slaves were tired and ready to go. I had just taken a pill to keep me awake on the drive back to base. Everything seemed set. We'd have breakfast while waiting for a call from the city to give the deal the final go-ahead. The chef came out of the kitchen carrying two plates of food. The farmer told him to put them on the table and bring ketchup. The chef had just put the plates down when the searchlights went on. For a moment I thought it was an alarm system, and I whistled for the dogs, but then I saw the farmer leap over the railings, and Strauch drew a gun from his holster, and I knew it was a raid. The game was up.

The SP can't resist being cruel. It's part of their training never to miss an opportunity to impose suffering. They measure their success by it, and are connoisseurs of the quantity and quality of the suffering they cause. There was no need to identify me as their spy, at least not right away, but they did. And having done so, why put me in a car alongside Strauch and then leave us alone? It amused them half an hour later to discover I had been beaten half to death and hadn't been able to defend myself because they had forgotten to remove the cuffs from my wrists.

They took me into custody, and kept me in a cell for three months, hosing me down every other day, feeding me now and then, until the time for the court hearing. Then they pumped me full of mush and vitamins, polished my skin and exercised me until I'd regained my slave's body. But everything they did was vile. Just as the officers were all well-bred boys who enjoyed inflicting violence on defenceless slaves, so the guards and orderlies amused themselves by shitting in our food and pissing in our drinks. I hardly cared anymore.

Whatever the outcome in court the SP would make sure I was thrown to the dogs. They would seek permission to flog and castrate me, and then send me to Flint Hill where I would die.

The guards took us from our cells in the evenings and made us fight and fuck each other, and then they'd fuck us and have us suck their cocks as they pissed, and then kick us all the way back to the cells. It was as relentless as it was pointless.

After I gave evidence in court - stripped naked and under threat of the whip rather than oath - I was moved to a small slave-holding unit run by a private dealership. There

I was allowed to exercise and was left alone. I got fed twice a day and could shower as often as I wanted and wash my clothes. Like some ever-hopeful animal my body was soon as trim as could be, and my skin glowed with health. I knew I was to be sold, and refused to think ahead, knowing all too well the futility of making plans.

Slaves came and went. Few stayed longer than a week. Most had been bought and were waiting transfer to their new owners, others were waiting to be auctioned. Fraternising was discouraged, and that suited us, as we knew we would soon be separated. During my fourth week they put a slave in with me. He was called Tuck and he had large sad light brown eyes and a body as tough and brawny as any field slave's. He seldom spoke but he did fuck me most nights, and let me sleep in his bunk. Why I needed the comfort of his body was a mystery to me. We are often the last to realise how we have changed, or when we have been broken. Or maybe I had always yearned for the peace of shared sleep, and the company of someone who asked for nothing and took only what was freely on offer.

Every day we expected to be parted, and that allowed us to ignore what was obvious to our guards - that we had become a pair. The SP guards would have made cruel sport of our union, but ours were more interested in good order and peaceful shifts. They left us alone. As the weeks passed we became ever more silent, and ever more dependent. We never expressed our feelings and kept our fucking rough and needy, but we clung to each other through the nights.

Finally I was taken to an interview room to be told my fate. It came as no surprise to see behind the desk the young SP officer from the Special Actions Brigade who had made the deal with me so many months before. I looked down at my gleaming body, and my clear mind, and wondered at the days I had spent without fear or pain. All that was now at an end. No doubt he had my pass to Flint Hill in the pocket of his combat pants, and had arranged for a special departure ceremony with whips and boots. His voice came as if from a great distance.

He told me how successful the operation had been, how they had arrested other illicit dealers and returned slaves to their rightful owners, and caught many runaways, and freed those who should have been freed. He said I had shown courage and endurance and nerve. I'd heard such nonsense before and found a feeling of contempt for such cruel games swelling inside me. Had they nothing better to do than taunt us? Was that all their training made them fit for?

The door behind me opened. A man entered carrying a case. Here we go, I thought, and prepared myself for an assault. There was a hand on my neck, and then a searing heat, and a peculiar lightness. Tears in my eyes. Knees shaking. Words that I couldn't make out but seemed to be telling me something. And then laughter, brief and bitter, but still laughter. My laughter. I was a free man. And Turk was standing in the doorway, staring at me with his huge pale eyes.

The SP man was shaking my hands and giving me details of bank accounts and accommodation. He said I need not take Turk unless I wanted him, but they would happily reclassify him as a domestic slave if I did. I told them I would take him with me. The SP officer said he had to go and as he left he reminded me to register Turk in my name. As he passed Turk he told him to be a good slave. To add force to his advice he punched him in the solar plexus.

END