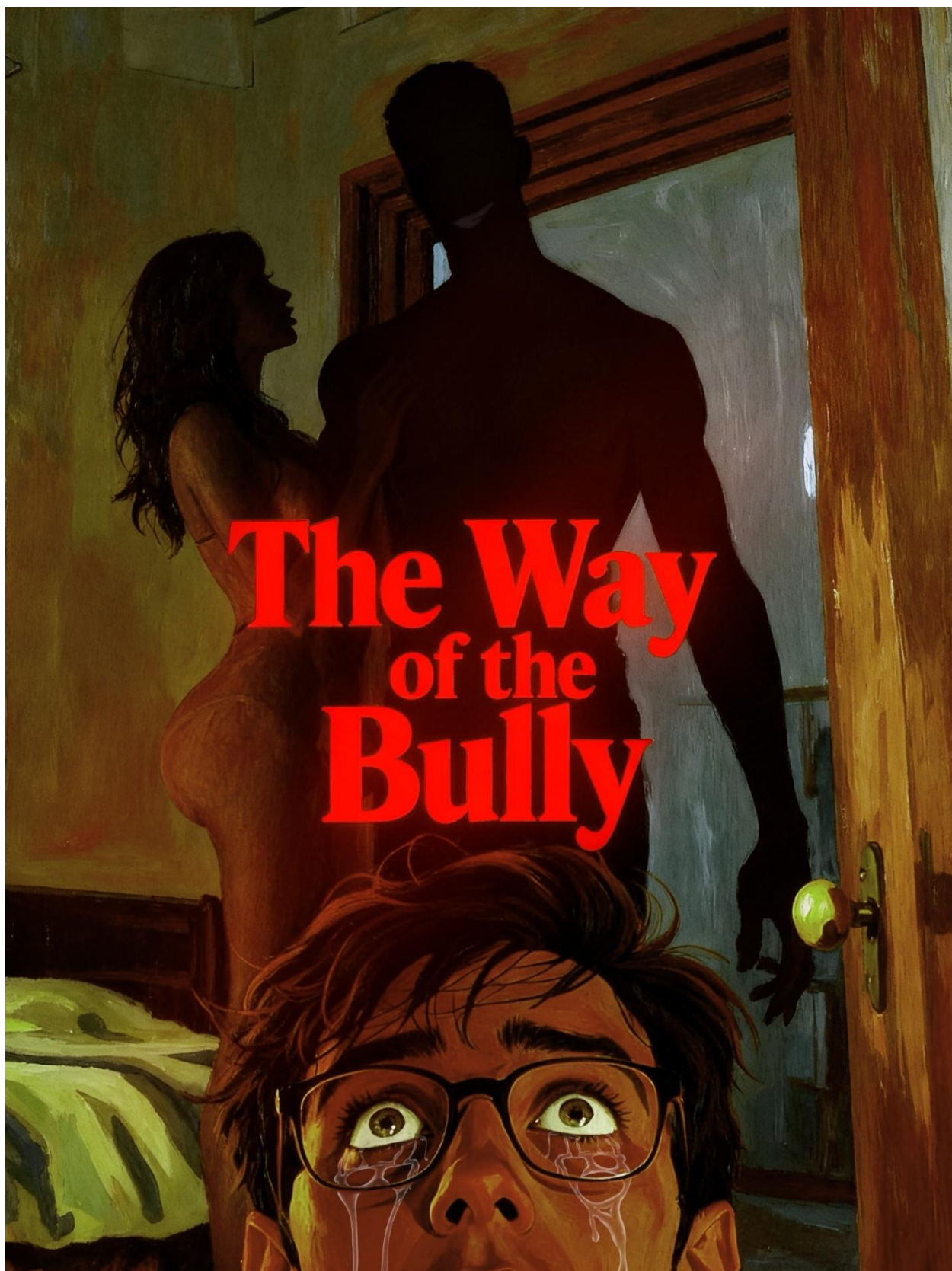




*This is a work of fiction intended for adult audiences only. All characters depicted in sexual situations are **18 years of age or older**. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The events, locations, and individuals portrayed in this book are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. This material contains explicit content and is not intended for readers under the age of 18. Reader discretion is advised.*

The polished linoleum floor of the science wing reflected the harsh fluorescent lights, casting a sickly glow. James adjusted the strap of his backpack, his shoulders hunched as he navigated the after-class rush. He just wanted to get to his locker and go home.

A flash of movement down a side corridor made him freeze. It was Chad. But he wasn't alone. He was standing unusually close to Dr. Evans, their conversation hushed and intense. James squinted, pushing his glasses up his nose. Dr. Evans, usually so stern and put-together, looked... different. His posture was slack, his head tilted as if he were listening to something fascinating. He wasn't making eye contact. His gaze was fixed somewhere around Chad's chin.

Chad was speaking, his voice a low, rhythmic murmur that James couldn't quite decipher. One of Chad's hands was gesturing slowly, his index finger tracing a tiny, intricate circle in the air between them.

A cold knot tightened in James's stomach. *What is he doing?*

As if sensing the weight of his stare, Chad's eyes flicked up. They locked directly onto James's. The hypnotic murmur stopped. Chad's hand fell to his side. The spell—if that's what it was—shattered.

Dr. Evans blinked rapidly, shaking his head as if clearing water from his ears. He looked confused for a moment, then his usual authoritative mask slid back into place. He offered Chad a stiff, almost polite nod before turning and walking away, his steps a little unsteady.

Chad didn't watch him go. His full attention was on James now, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face. He started walking toward him, each step deliberate, closing the distance between them in the now-empty hallway.

James's heart hammered against his ribs. He wanted to run, but his feet felt rooted to the spot.

"Hey, James," Chad said, his voice dripping with a fake, cloying warmth. He stopped just a little too close, invading James's personal space. "Just wanted to say it's been *really* great working with your mother."

James's fear curdled into anger. He scoffed, the sound harsh in the quiet hall. "Yeah, funny, Chad. I know what you're doing."

Chad's smile didn't waver. He feigned confusion, tilting his head in a mockery of innocence. "What do you mean? What am I doing? I'm just volunteering my time. I'm just doing my part for my community." He spread his hands wide, the picture of altruistic confusion.

The audacity was breathtaking. James gave a short, derisive laugh. "Right. Haha. We both know that's not what you're doing."

"Jeez, James," Chad said, his tone shifting to one of wounded sincerity. "*I really don't know what you're talking about.*" He took a half-step closer. James could smell his cheap, sporty cologne. He could see the faint stubble along his jaw. The physical presence of him was overwhelming, a wall of muscle and malicious intent.

Chad's eyes glinted with undisguised triumph. He leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that felt like a violation. "*Anyways, I'll see you around.*"

He pulled back, the smirk returning full force. He gave James a pat on the shoulder that was just a little too hard to be friendly.

"I'll tell your mom you said hi."

With that, he turned and strolled down the hallway, his footsteps echoing with a confidence that felt like a physical blow. James stood there, frozen, the echo of those words bouncing around in his skull. *I'll tell your mom you said hi.*

* * *

The heavy door to Susan's office clicked shut, sealing them in a world of quiet. The chaotic energy from the main hall was gone, replaced by the soft hum of the fluorescent light overhead and the distant, fading sound of a car driving past outside.

Susan practically collapsed into her worn desk chair, the old springs groaning in protest. She let out a long, ragged sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of her being. "Gosh, what a day," she breathed, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling. "Man, oh, man. Just... need to unwind."

Chad took his usual seat across from her, the one that was becoming his. He mirrored a look of casual fatigue, but his focus was razor-sharp. "Rough one," he agreed, his voice a low, sympathetic rumble.

She sat forward, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. "Hey, Chad," she began, a hint of shyness in her tone. She looked at him, her eyes tired but hopeful. "Can you maybe... do that thing that you did with your hand the other day? You know, the thing you said that helps you relax?"

A jolt of pure, undiluted victory shot through him. He kept his expression neutral, just a flicker of pleasant surprise. "Oh, yeah?" he said softly. "You mean this?" He lifted his right hand, his index finger beginning to trace a slow, intricate spiral in the air between them.

Her eyes locked onto the movement instantly, a soft, grateful smile touching her lips. "Yeah. I've been thinking about it all day." A faint blush colored her cheeks. "What is it? What's it called?"

"It's called, The Way," he said, his voice dropping into that smooth, rhythmic cadence he'd practiced. He made it sound like a secret. "It's a silly meditation trick... um... my mom taught me." An easy lie.

"Oh, well, it's just really nice." Her gaze was glued to his moving finger, her shoulders already beginning to lose their stiffness. "It feels nice after a long day to just relax. Last time, it really did wonders to make me feel nice and loose."

"Yeah, of course," Chad said, his voice the very picture of gentle reassurance. He began to count, the numbers falling from his lips like a soft, steady rain. "Thirty... twenty-nine... twenty-eight..."

He watched her closely. Her eyelids grew heavy, fluttering shut for a second before opening again, her focus entirely on the mesmerizing motion of his finger.

"That's it," she murmured, her voice slurring just a little. "There it is. Thank you, Chad. This is nice."

"Fifteen... sixteen... fourteen... thirteen... twelve... eleven..."

Her breathing deepened. Her head lolled back against the headrest, a soft, involuntary sound escaping her lips. It wasn't loud, just a quiet, contented hum in the back of her throat. *A moan.*

"Five... four... three... two... one."

The change was absolute. All the remaining vestiges of the day's stress melted from her face. Her body went pliant and heavy in the chair. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, stared past him at nothing, seeing only the peaceful emptiness he provided for her. She was under.

"Susan," he said, his voice quiet but firm in the hushed room. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful," she replied, her voice a distant, dreamy sigh. "So nice." Her tone was utterly relaxed, but beneath the drowsy quality, he detected it—a new, subtle undercurrent of pleasure. A warmth.

"Yes," he affirmed. He let the silence hang for a moment, letting her bathe in the sensation. "Now tell me, were you thinking about this throughout the day? About how this feels?"

"Oh yes," she breathed, a slow smile spreading across her face. "All day. Every once in a while, I would think about the last couple of times we were in here... just how nice it feels. I really like it."

"Yes, of course you do, Susan." He leaned forward an inch, his voice dropping to an intimate murmur. "You like it a lot. This feels good, doesn't it?"

"Mmmhmm."

"I want you to think about it more often." He was weaving the suggestion into the fabric of her subconscious. "I want you to think of it as *feeling good*. It makes you feel good to think about coming here with me at the end of the day and relax and meditate." He paused, letting the words sink in. "It makes you feel good *all over*

Susan shifted in her chair, a subtle, reflexive squirm. Her thighs pressed together for a brief second. "Yeah," she whispered, her voice a little thicker. "It feels good. It feels very good... all over."

The admission sent a thrill through him. *Perfect*. "Now, when you think about it, it brings you a little pleasure throughout the day. A pleasure to think about relaxing here, letting your mind drift when you're in here with me."

"Yesssss," she drew the word out into a long, sibilant hiss. "Pleasure."

He watched her, this mature, kind woman reduced to a vessel of simple, suggested sensations. It was the most powerful he had ever felt. He decided to push further, to lay the next stone on the path.

"Now, Susan, I want to ask you something. Be honest. Do you like me?"

Her brow furrowed slightly, a tiny ripple in her placid state. "Um, you're nice. You're a good worker. You're helpful."

He smiled. A defensive, logical answer. Her conscious mind trying to assert itself. He would bypass it completely. "Yes, but do you *like* me? Do you find me attractive?"

"No, no, no." She started to shake her head, a jerky, automatic denial.

"That's okay, Susan," he soothed, his voice never losing its calming rhythm. "But let me ask you something. Do you think you might understand how someone *could* find me attractive?"

He watched the gears turn in her entranced mind. The denial faded, replaced by a more objective consideration. "Oh," she said softly. "Well, yes."

"Yeah, good." He could barely contain his grin. "I want you to think about that. Think about how someone could find me attractive. Someone like me... who's good and helpful."

"Yes, yeah. I see that. "

"Those are things that are very appealing, right?" He was leading her, building the argument brick by brick. "Also... I'm big. I'm strong. Which means I must be muscular... as well as, you know... helpful and kind."

"Yes," she agreed, her voice gaining a sliver of conviction. "Those are things that are attractive."

"That's right." The words were syrup. "People find me attractive, don't they?"

"Yeah," she said, her head tilting. "They probably do."

"I think it's fairly certain that people find me attractive."

"Yes. People find you attractive."

He leaned in, his face closer to hers than it had ever been. He could see the faint lines at the corners of her eyes, the soft part of her lips. "People find me attractive. People find me attractive." It was an echo, a reinforcement. "I'm an attractive man. People say it. People think it. It must be true. I'm an attractive man."

"You're... an attractive man," she repeated, her glazed eyes staring through him.

"Think it over and over. Throughout the day, tomorrow, I want you to find time to just think about that. Okay?"

"Yes."

“Good.” He sat back.

* * *

The front door clicked shut behind James, the familiar sound echoing through the unusually still house. He dropped his heavy backpack by the entrance with a dull thud, the weight of textbooks and the day’s anxieties sloughing off his shoulders.

“Mom?” he called out, his voice bouncing off the walls. “You home?”

Silence.

He’d seen her sedan in the driveway, so she had to be here. It was her day off. A little knot of concern began to tighten in his chest. Maybe she was in the shower.

He padded into the kitchen. Empty. The countertops were clean, the sink dry. No note. The living room was just as still, the afternoon sun casting long, lazy rectangles across the carpet. The television was dark. He peeked out into the backyard through the sliding glass door. Nothing.

Where is she?

He was about to call out again when he heard it. A sound. Muffled, distant. It came from down the hall, toward the bedrooms.

He walked slowly, his socked feet making no sound on the carpet. As he neared his mother’s closed bedroom door, the sound clarified. It was a voice. *Her* voice. Muted, as if talking to herself, or... into a pillow.

He paused just outside, his ear nearly touching the cool wood of the door.

“...so attractive...”

The words were a breathy sigh, barely audible. James froze.

“...he’s so attractive...”

There it was again. The same phrase, slurred with a strange, dreamy quality. It was his mother's voice, but it was layered with a tone he'd never heard from her before—a husky, intimate warmth that felt completely out of place.

“God, he’s so good-looking... What a man...”

A low, soft moan followed the words. It was unmistakable. A sound of pleasure, stifled but urgent.

James's mind reeled. His first, bewildered thought was of a movie, or a phone call. But the TV wasn't on. And the voice wasn't conversational; it was... reverent. Private.

James didn't know what to do. This was a line he never imagined crossing, a door he never wanted to open. He should walk away. Give her privacy. This wasn't for him.

But the wrongness of it held him rooted. That voice. Those words. They didn't sound like his mom. This voice was languid and... *needy*.

He couldn't just leave. What if she was upset? What if something was wrong?

His hand, trembling slightly, curled into a fist. He rapped his knuckles against the door, the sound harsh and abrupt in the silent hallway.

The murmuring stopped instantly. He heard a sudden, sharp rustle of sheets, a quick intake of breath. The frantic, guilty sound of movement.

Then, silence.

After a long, heart-thumping moment, her voice came through the door. “What is it, honey?”

It was her normal voice, or a rushed, flustered imitation of it. A half-octave too high. *Slightly rushed*.

“Mom?” he said, his own voice sounding thin and young. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m fine.” The words tumbled out too quickly. A denial before the question was even fully asked. “What do you mean? I’m okay.”

The reassurance was too forceful. It confirmed his unease instead of quelling it. Something *was* going on.

“Oh, okay,” he said, grasping for normalcy, for an excuse for his interruption. “I was going to order out. Do you want anything?”

A beat of silence. He could almost picture her on the other side of the door, composing herself, smoothing her hair.

“Sure,” she finally said, her tone settling into something closer to her usual self, though a breathless edge remained. “Just give me whatever you get.”

“Okay, Mom.”

He stood there for another second, waiting for the door to open, for her to offer some explanation for the muffled sounds, for the strange, breathy words. But the door remained shut.

He turned and walked away, each step heavy with a confusion that was slowly curdling into a sickening suspicion. He didn’t understand what he’d heard, not really. But the cadence of those murmured words, the specific phrasing, echoed in his mind.

He’s so attractive?

* * *

EARLIER THAT DAY

The cold, hard handle of the shopping cart was a stark contrast to the warmth blooming under Susan’s skin. She pushed it slowly, her eyes scanning the list clutched in her other hand.

Celery. Some tomatoes. She frowned, her focus fraying at the edges. *I need to get some cereal.*

She turned the cart, the wheels whining on the polished floor, and directed it toward the far aisle. The store was a cacophony of beeping scanners, muffled conversations, and piped-in music, but it all felt distant, muffled by the static in her own mind.

A low, restless energy hummed through her. She felt... on edge. The kind of tension that settled in her shoulders after a long day, a taut wire waiting to be cut. She sighed, and her mind, unbidden, offered a solution. A memory.

It would be so nice to just relax. Just like... after work.

A specific image blossomed behind her eyes: the quiet click of her office door, the worn fabric of her chair, and him. Chad. His low, rhythmic voice. The slow, mesmerizing circle of his finger. The profound, heavy calm that followed.

A soft, involuntary sound escaped her lips—a faint moan—as she pushed the cart forward. Her eyes fluttered shut for a second too long, and she snapped them open, a flush of heat rising to her cheeks. *God, Susan, you're in public.*

She shook her head, a quick, dismissive gesture, and tightened her grip on the cart. It was harmless. A pleasant daydream. A mental vacation. It happened a few times a day now, these little escapes. She shrugged it off each time.

But this time, it was different. The thought didn't fade. It deepened.

It wasn't just the feeling of relaxation anymore. It was the source. Her mind, traitorously, began adding details. The memory of his voice bled into the image of *him*. Eighteen-year-old Chad. Tall. His broad shoulders straining against the cheap fabric of his volunteer t-shirt. That confident set of his jaw.

Her breath hitched as she realized she'd walked right past the cereal aisle. She stopped the cart, a fresh wave of self-consciousness washing over her. *Get a grip.*

She turned around, maneuvering the cart back the way she came. As she entered the brightly lit aisle, a new, more vivid flash seized her. Not a memory, but an imagination. A vision of muscles rippling under sun-kissed skin. *Washboard abs*. The thought was clear, specific. *His arms. So strong*. She could almost feel the weight of them.

She paused in front of the colorful boxes, her gaze unfocused. What was she looking for? Her eyes drifted over the cartoons and athletes.

And then she saw him.

On a red and white box of Wheaties. It was *him*. Chad. He wasn't in athletic gear. He was wearing nothing but a tight, black Speedo, his body oiled and gleaming, every muscle flexed and defined for the camera. He was staring right at her, a smoldering look in his piercing blue eyes.

She stared, her mouth going slightly dry. The image was so vivid, so real. Her heart thudded against her ribs.

She blinked, hard.

The box resolved back into a normal, utterly mundane box of Wheaties. A generic, smiling athlete grinned back at her.

A shaky breath escaped her. *What is wrong with me?* Her hand trembled slightly as she reached out, grabbed the box, and practically threw it into the cart. She needed to get out of here.

She continued her shopping on autopilot, her mind a runaway train. Flashes of his chiseled jawline. The way his thick, dark hair always looked effortlessly perfect. His smile, which could be so charming when he wanted it to be.

She found herself muttering under her breath, the words a subconscious whisper meant only for her. *“God, he’s so attractive. He’s so attractive.”*

She passed an elderly woman scrutinizing a coupon book. The woman’s head snapped up, her eyes narrowing behind her spectacles, clearly having heard the murmured confession. She gave Susan a long, curious, and slightly judging look.

Susan’s face burned. She averted her eyes, staring intently at a pyramid of canned soup as if it held the secrets of the universe. She shook her head again, a more violent motion this time, trying to physically dislodge the thoughts. *Snap out of it. He’s young. James’s age.*

But the argument felt weak, hollowed out by the persistent, thrilling heat coiling low in her belly.

Finally, her cart was full. She stood in the checkout line, staring blankly at the conveyor belt, willing her mind to go numb. But her eyes drifted to the magazine rack next to her.

And the world twisted again.

Every cover, every male model, every Hollywood actor—their faces morphed. Their features smoothed and shifted, reformed into *his*. Chad’s blue eyes stared out from a dozen different bodies, from a dozen different magazine covers. All of them were perfect. All of them were fit. All of them were *him*.

“God, he’s so attractive,” she breathed, the words a little louder this time, laden with a want she didn’t recognize in herself.

She was rubbing her thighs together subtly, a slow, restless motion against the denim of her jeans. The friction was a poor substitute, a tiny spark trying to ignite a fire. She was lost in the aisle, in the sea of his faces.

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

The voice cut through her daze. She blinked. The cashier, a bored-looking teenager, was motioning impatiently.

“You’re next.”

Susan looked behind her. A line of people stared back, their expressions a mix of impatience and pity. She felt a wave of hot, humiliated flush crawl up her neck.

“Oh! Sorry. Yes,” she stammered, her voice too high.

She hurried forward, avoiding all eye contact, her movements clumsy as she unloaded her groceries. All she could think about was getting home. Getting behind a locked door.

Where she could finally, finally relieve the delicious, unbearable tension thrumming through her entire body.