

Johnno: The Best Man

The Whispering Cave looms in the darkness, its damp, briny air wrapping around Johnno as he leads the group into its eerie depths. Laughter bounces off the jagged rock walls, masking the tension that thickens with each step. The Best Man, Will, bound and blindfolded, stumbles slightly as he is led forward, grinning despite his discomfort. To him, this is just another wild stunt, another reckless prank in the long line of juvenile traditions that had always been part of their friendship. But Johnno's grip on his arm is just a little too firm, his steps a little too deliberate, his silence stretching just a little too long. This isn't just about tradition, not for Johnno—this is something deeper, something darker, something he has been waiting for far too long to say. The others, half-drunk and giddy with adrenaline, cheer him on, oblivious to the undercurrent of resentment rippling beneath his every move.

As they reach the heart of the cave, the stench of rotting seaweed and damp stone fills the air, mingling with the salty tang of the approaching tide. The ground beneath their feet is slick with moisture, and the sound of waves crashing against distant rocks grows louder, more insistent. Johnno watches Will's face as the laughter around them starts to fade, as the realization creeps in that this is more than just a game. The blindfold robs Will of the confidence he usually wears like armor, and for the first time, Johnno sees him without the veil of effortless charm that had always kept him one step ahead. The group, now quiet with the weight of the moment, watches as Johnno tightens his grip on Will's shoulders. Will shifts uncomfortably, a nervous chuckle escaping his lips. "Alright, Johnno," he says, trying to keep the amusement in his voice. "Joke's over, yeah?"

But it isn't over. Not yet.

Johnno has carried the weight of this moment for years, a heavy stone pressing against his ribs, waiting for the right time to break free. He has spent too many nights

replaying the past, tracing every betrayal, every humiliation, every time Will had used him, manipulated him, left him behind. This night, this cave, is his stage now. The memory of their school days floods his mind, the night they thought they were invincible, the night they took things too far. He can still see the face of the boy they called "Loner," can still hear the pleading in his voice as they tied him to the railing, laughing, so sure that the tide wouldn't reach him. But it had. And in the morning, he was gone. They had promised never to speak of it again, and Will—self-assured, golden, untouchable Will—had moved on as though it had never happened. But Johnno never had. He never could.

Will's shoulders stiffen as Johnno's voice finally breaks the silence. He lays it all out, every grievance, every wound that had never quite healed. The stolen business opportunity, the broken promises, the betrayal that went beyond schoolyard cruelty and into something far worse. Will tries to brush it off at first, tries to play it cool, but there's a crack in his voice that Johnno catches. He's afraid. Not of the cave, not of the dark, but of what Johnno knows, of what he might finally do. "You think you're the victim?" Johnno spits, his hands curling into fists. "You always do, don't you? You think you can just walk away from everything, like none of it ever mattered."

The tide creeps closer, licking at Will's shoes, and for the first time, he pulls at his restraints, testing them. Johnno takes a step back, watching him struggle, watching the confidence drain from his face. For a split second, he considers pushing this further, making Will feel even a fraction of the fear they had once inflicted on someone else. But something stops him—a flicker of exhaustion, of realization. He isn't Will. He isn't like him.

With a sharp breath, Johnno turns and walks away, leaving Will in the cold embrace of the cave, the whispers of the tide growing louder around him. He doesn't look back. He doesn't need to. The past will always be there, but tonight, for the first time in years, he isn't the one drowning in it.