

2. Slasher Slashed

Bastard sheriff. Damned gun-totin' goof had tried to throw a kink into this special night.

Couldn't. Not the essence of it anyway.

Zane ribbed the squealing mutt with a swift kick to stop its noise, but that only cranked up the volume.

Zane knelt before the couple, his knees cracking in protest. Through layers of fabric, he squeezed the woman's breasts, the man's organ.

The bag that clung stubbornly to the base of the man's left ear convinced you there might be something beneath. But his lack of a *right* earlobe—the sole blat in an otherwise persuasive visual symphony—told the real story.

Promjumper.

Even so, his exposed lobe-stump was quite the turn-on. Ditto the woman's undocked friendship lobe, whose faux-chartreuse dye-job reminded Zane of the crushed kernels of pistachios. And this doped-up duo was completely at his mercy.

The mutt's whimpers began again to grate on him. Zane checked his watch. Time to shake it.

He kissed the two of them on the lips, the man pretty much out, but the woman responding as in a dream, her pretty pink tonguetip starting to show.

They couldn't trace lipmarks.

Zane was sure of it.

Further play could wait until just before he axed them, once the dog was dead.

After he'd had his practice? The young pair at the prom, whose names and place of death waited inside the packet upstairs.

Zane untied the leash from the sink trap.

Stupid mutt tried to lick his face, had to be batted away. He slack-jerked it into the light, then retied its leash to the trough leg closest to the drain.

That would minimize cleanup.

"Zane? You need anything?" Top of the cellar stairs.

Bitch wife wanted to watch. She had tried to coax him into taking her to the prom. Hedda would lick blood if he let her.



"For the zillionth time, I'm fine. Leave it alone, Hedda. You're staying home."

A hurt pause, then petulance: "Just trying to be helpful."

She shut the door.

The promise of the evening flared in Zane's body. Fired up by blood lust, he would come home from his killings at Corundum High and undo his worst mistake. Into the dustbin of memory would he drop-kick his sorry-ass wives. Then he and his lover would run off, assume new identities, and begin afresh.

When he let go of the leash, the dog's dumb exuberance yanked at the empty trough.

Damned thing needed ballast.

Zane's eyes lighted on the drugged couple. "What the heck."

The man alone might suffice.

They had shaved him at the jail. Homeless men typically had stubble or beards, but for prom practice they tended to clean up nicely.

Zane tugged at the man's right biceps.

"Come on, junior," he coaxed, shouldering the lulled deloused carton-dweller off the couch. The woman slid along the cushions, soft moans issuing from her lips. "You'll feel right at home in here."

It took several tries to get him into the trough. Zane knee'd one tuxedo'd leg over the rim, then the other, and lay the bastard down. He was heavy, more a matter of large than well-fed.

But this was the last time Zane would have to lift him.

More puppy tugs. More whimpers. More scrape and movement of the trough away from the drain.

Zane sighed.

The woman was in a bad way, her perm crushed against a couch arm as her fingers fretted at her brow. "Come on, honey. Your turn."

"Please, no." She was as listless as a sack of tapioca.

Zane drew her off the couch. A corsage of white carnations edged in blue tickled his nose. He snaked a hand beneath her gown, felt hot thigh, a bikini'd rump, hints of a slit.

Maneuvering her troughward, he wondered why no one this sexy had ever come on to him when he was her age.

He had her *now* though and, the law be damned, he would use her in some undetectable way, her and her companion both, before he was finished.

Zane positioned her atop her date, felled refugees from a wedding cake. The man's lobestub glistened like a dare. Zane pressed his lips to it.

The thrill of it blooded him below. Were time not pressing, he would have slipped off his lobebag and stroked himself to head-heaven.

The trough, which he pushed back into place by the drain, now had sufficient weight to anchor the dog's ardor. But the couple was showing signs of revival.

The medicine cabinet.

He raced for the steps. Hedda stood at the door, Camille topless beside her.

Zane glared at them. "Stay out of the basement," he warned, leaving the door ajar.

"Do you need anything?" Hedda asked.

"I'm fine."

Hallway. A snap of the light. Tired old sink. He clicked the mirror open and swung it aside. Medicines, sleeping pills, laxatives, a generous supply of Tuffskin-in-a-Tub.

Ah.

Chloroform.

Sampler drug-baskets had been the rage among realtors when he and the wives had traded up in houses two years before. Zane snatched the bottle up, shoved a few gauze pads into his back pocket, and returned to the basement.

The couple, still groggy, had begun to shift about in the trough, struggling for the energy to open their eyes. Zane knocked the man out first, then the woman, same pad on both. He had bought himself maybe ten minutes.

Keep focus on the mutt, keep his nerves calm, don't jinx his aim. Those were his goals.

Ready.

Ice Ghoul? *He'd* give them Ice Ghoul.

The axe seated itself in his hands, palm-wrap behind its blade. He walked about the drain until he faced the wag-tailed, droopy-tongued pup in the dim light, the gray trough stuffed with a heap of prom costumes.

Zane's practice chops in the woods outside of Corundum had been a cakewalk. Flinders flew. His arms sang to the rhythm of exertion, and the scent of tree sap swirled in his nostrils.

Here? Nothing but a chore.

Zane gritted his teeth, raised the sucker, and let fly. Missed the ribcage. Caught a paw instead. Blood bloomed where toes had been. The dog's whine rose to a freakish yelp.

Focus. Focus.

He inhaled on the upswing, then brought it down with a huff, slamming the dog back into the trough, gashing its belly. Out gushed a geyser of crimson, spilling across the concrete.

As the fur blackened around the blow, Zane lifted the axe once more, fine droplets in the air, that same stench that bullied its way down the school hallways when butchery class let out.

Again!

A hind leg, sliced, dangled awry. Those eyes, the panicked yelps; he should have chloroformed the damned *dog*.

Finish him, why don't you?

The next blow struck an artery. Blood fountained up and out, drenching Zane's pantleg. It splashed hot, then went cold and clingy. Such *life* there was in the mutt, struggling out of the carnage as if to undo it.

Zane caught its eyes, held them as he brought the blade straight down between them, burying it so that the skull collapsed and fell—a bleached steerhead in the desert—to the cement floor.

Zane's heart was pounding.

He laughed and cried with joy.

Through the cellar door, he heard a doorbell chime.

Let the bitches get it.

Despite an overpowering need to be chosen as the school's designated slasher, Zane had always preferred violence at one remove.

The televised electrocutions on *Notorious* were just his speed. Indeed, he often used the show's soundtrack, its screams tracking the rise and fall of electricity through the victims, to draw the most amazing artwork from his students.

Now, he wasn't so sure.

This dog weren't no cord of wood. This had been life *itself*, and no more direct contact with life had Zane Fronemeyer had than in ending it.

First step, doggiedom.

Next, the homeless.

But could he endure their eyes? Damned straight he could!

Zane planted himself on the couch and sat forward, the axe angled like a leaf rake between his jittery knees.

Come on, come on, he thought, I didn't give you *that* much chloroform. Open your frigging eyes so I can finish you off and be on my way.

The cellar door unlatched.

Zane looked up in annoyance.

Dexter Poindexter averted his gaze from the mirror. He was a shy guy. Too shy for his own good, some people said.

That's what Mommy and Daddy told him, though Daddy Owen, the spouse they had divorced the year before, disagreed.

Dex fluffed the wide ends of his bone-white bowtie, nice smooth ripples. Its color and satin sheen matched his lobebag, a tight garter band right around the base of the ear and a generous splay below.

He sincerely hoped these things were dry-cleaned between rentals. It grossed Dex out to think of some other guy's lovelobe in this same bag. Maybe *many* guys, though styles changed often enough that it wasn't likely.

Dex shrugged into the coat, buttoned a button at his waist, and shot the sleeves.

His tux looked sharp.

Tweed would whistle at it. Her eyes would go wide. Of course, Dex would be busy admiring what a knockout *she* was in her gown, which she had described again and again these past few weeks in great detail.

It was fortunate they were in the dance band. Running through one chart after another would take their minds off the general terror.

As sophomores and juniors, he and Tweed had played senior proms, learning first hand what it was like to see the murdered couple carried into the gym, laid out beside the centerpiece, danced around, and at midnight torn apart.

That reminded him.

He went to the dresser and lifted the cleaver, its blade no longer than his index finger and not much wider. His church group—all church groups across the nation did this—had given him and Tweed practice. An expendable sheepdog. Dex had gotten a cross-section of tufted ear and only been nicked once.

Of course, tonight there would be more kids diving in to futter the couple. And their state of mind would be way more agitated.

That was for sure.

Dex's right leg twitched.

You had to be brave, cram in there, push and shove and lunge, praying that some doofus did not, by design or accident, clip your lobes, or slice off your fingers, or slash your face.

Dex raised his suitcoat's right flap.

These tuxes, the more expensive ones anyway, had a special pair of loops. On the right loop, he secured the handle of his cleaver. On the left, his Futterware container.

The cuffs caught his attention, as wide as high collars, and as flappy.

Cufflinks.

As stern as Dex's father was, he always had his son's welfare at heart. Dex removed the lid from the white box on his bureau. On top of a layer of cotton waited the gold-skull cufflinks his father had worn, and Dex's grampa before him.

Signs of love.

Mommy and Daddy had that ferocious look stitched to their faces. Harsh words spilled in profusion from their mouths. They were quick with the whip and Christlike in their savagery.

But they were proud of him, pleased in his choice of Tweed as a girlfriend, and bursting with joy that tonight was Dex's prom night.

He would brave the slasher, cut his way through the brambles, and emerge triumphant and ready to take his place as a useful citizen.

What more could he ask of life than that?

Dex poked a cufflink through a stiff ironed hole and snapped it into place.

The principal of Corundum High was taking his sweet time getting ready.

He wasn't showering.

He wasn't dressing.

Nor was he busy thinking mean thoughts about the little shits who would get their comeuppance tonight.

In point of fact, Peyton "Futzy" Buttweiler was on his hands and knees in the playroom, being whipped senseless by his lacklove wives.

"I'm sorry," sniveled Futzy.

Torment sneered. "Far as I'm concerned, you're not nearly sorry enough. He isn't, is he, Trusk? Lay into the fucker!"

And Trusk, the heftier wife, did as she was told.

Frayed and beaded whip-ends sizzled through the air and snapped away, interwoven with the high smack of Torment's bullwhip, crosswise upon naughty little Futzy Buttweiler's back.

Bloodspray splattered the walls, an abstract mural in progress.

Futzy's much deserved flaying fired up his brain. But his dead daughter's image burned as bright as ever.

"Harder," he pleaded. "Harder!"

"You miserable little shit-smoocher," said Torment. "Don't you *dare* order me and Trusk about. We're not a couple of high school tramps. You see all those blood flecks on the wall?" She bunched up twists of Futzy's sweat-slicked hair and yanked his head back. "Tomorrow, first thing, you're going to lick 'em all off, every damned one of them. No breakfast for old Futzy-Wutzy till he gets these walls spanking clean."

"His wounds are closing," observed Trusk.

"Well, fuck," said Torment, "we can't have that now, can we? Open 'em back up. Make new ones. Real fierce and frenzied, Trusk. Slice the scumwipe some indelible memories. Volley!"

With that, Trusk and Torment redoubled their effort. Grunting into their swings, they so minced the skin covering Futzy's shoulders and ribs, that wide expanses of bone peered through. Seas of red rushed in, to be parted by renewed whipsmacks.

"*Fuck* the little bastard!" shouted Torment. "*Fuck* his sorry ass!"

Futzy wept.

Kitty's young face shone bright and smiling. Her senior picture.

But around the edges of her smile peered an accusatory look, a look of shame and disgust at her father's inaction at her senior prom.

She was right to scorn him.

Do it, he thought to the two bitches he had taken in to punish him after Kitty's death.

A marital masochist, that's what he was.

Do it. Do it!

He dared not say it aloud, lest they withhold his punishment entirely.

"Now," said lean and mean Torment, the brains of the duo. "Give off. Man the machine."

Trusk's whip handle clattered to the floor.

Futzy braced himself for the pain.

Spang went the release mechanism and *hush-hush-hush* the grains of salt from the funnel above. They pinging and stippled against his skin, finding their way, much of them, into the V's of his wounds.

Salt knifed into him everywhere. Pain waved through his body like the unending misery twenty years before, the thoughts he could not shut off no matter how hard he tried.

Futzy passed out, the harsh words of his wives ringing in his ears, longing for death but knowing it would not yet be his.

The blue clunker pulled up to the curb and parked two blocks from Zane Fronemeyer's house.

A quiet walk past manicured lawns, no faces peering out. The doorbell chimed. Zane would be in the basement. But if not, if he was finished already, knifing three of them wouldn't pose too great a problem.

All planned, all smooth.

Familiar heads appeared at the decorative window in the door: Hedda and Camille, taste of sex on the lips, a threeway suckle on left lobes until they had gone giddily into simultaneous oral orgasm.

The deadbolt snapped and the door swung open.

Surprise lit their faces.

"Hello, you two." Casual. Not too loud.

"Zane's home," said Hedda. "Are you sure—"

"It's all right. If he comes upstairs, I'll offer an excuse. I have a few things I wanted to give you. Is it all right if I come in?"

Better be.

Discretion cautioned against the ruckus of forced entry.

Empty boxes in the clutched paper bag hid the shape of the knife.

Camille fretted. "Well I don't—"

"Sure," said Hedda.

Snap judgment.

That and her sex drive, a burning focus on whatever flesh happened to be at hand, were Hedda's most alluring traits.

The door settled snug in its frame as Hedda surged forward into a kiss.

Camille went nonlinear: "Hedda, what are you doing? Zane could pop up any minute!"

Hedda's hunger was palpable. "Take us away," she urged. "Tonight."

"Soon. I promise."

"Zane's a prize bore," said Hedda, her eyes hard and fiery. Amazing how such an attractive woman now held no interest at all, had become so guiltlessly killable.

"We don't like him," Camille offered.

"The three of us will be dynamite together. It'll happen soon, not much longer. But for now, I've got to go. I only wanted to drop these gifts off."

Beyond the art teacher's fluxed mother, the vestibule arched into the family room, where heavy curtains shut out the night.

As they approached the couch, they passed an end table that held a thick packet with Corundum High's clocktower logo in its upper left corner and "Z. Fronemeyer" scrawled across it in loopy ballpoint.

"What's the occasion?" asked Camille.

"Nothing special. I just wanted to express my love for you both. Hedda, sit here. Camille, beside her. That's it."

The bagtop uncrumpled. No footsteps clumped up the cellar stairs. A free shot at Fronemeyer's wives.

Inside the bag, the duct-taped boxes split on a hinge to yield the knife handle.

"Close your eyes and open your hands."

"Oh come on!" Blond-haired Hedda gave a practiced flick to her head that tossed just so her shoulder-length shag-cut. But she grinned.

"Humor me. Please."

They did.

The razored edge opened Hedda's throat to the bone, savage and deep, no need to grip a hank of hair. Just as well, since Camille's eyes sprang open at the sudden gesture. Her mouth sucked in air for a scream.

Clamp that mouth.

Press her back into the couch, off-balance.

Putty.

Once more the knife blade. Its swift passage reflected in Camille's eyes. She pitched right, dying, as the weapon was wiped clean on an end-cushion.

Doing Zane in was the goal, which wasn't yet a sure thing. No time to savor his wives' death throes. These two were mere pawns.

Kill Zane.

Then tackle the packet.

Game plans were always easier when you knew what your enemy had in mind. Besides, a map of the school's secret backways would be a welcomed refresher.

The kitchen flashed by in bright fluorescent light. Racing heartbeats erased all detail.

Stay calm. Set things right.

An image of the Lion of God slaughtering the moneychangers flared up. Some sanitized filmstrip from Bible school long ago.

Love owed, love denied.

These moved the world.

The knob felt cool. The flimsy cellar door, flung back, gave onto blue-painted steps.

Exasperation: "Hedda, for the last time—"

"It's me, Zane." Conceal the knife behind a pantleg. In the subdued light on the stairs, it would look perhaps like an injured arm.

Zane puzzled out his lover's name. His voice turned surprised and annoyed. Halfway down, Zane became visible, the washing machine behind him.

He rose from the couch, holding a bloody axe. The trough was dimly lit, but a bare lightbulb above the dryer caught glistens of gore threading into the drain. "But we were going to meet at *your* place after I . . . what kind of a . . . hey wait, what do you think you're—"

The axe looked tricky, a sharp thing that might fall in a scuffle. Go for the bold move, came the thought. A left-handed grip on the axe handle. Done!

Zane clenched tighter to counter.

The knife flew up and over. It caught on something hard in his chest, then slipped past to stab deep.

A Greek mask frowned upon his face: a bunched brow, anguished eyes, lips fizzling like a limp balloon, all of it in motion. Flares of life flashing by tried to stick and hold. But something vital had been skewered.

Zane collapsed, a house of cards falling inward. The axehead hung abruptly left, his fingers releasing their grip on the handle. The axe clattered to the floor. Then Zane, drifting downward, took to the tattered couch.

"Why—" he wheezed.

"Call it payback."

A glimpse aside into obscurity. The cellar smelled like meat and sewage. You would think the homeless would catch on. But they were as dumb as Thanksgiving turkeys.

Zane had just snuffed two more here.

Close to fifteen thousand nationwide bought the farm every year, if the networks told the truth.

Fifteen thousand more in prom couples.

A chill took hold, then burgeoning heat.

The blade angled from Zane's chest, the stir of a gelatinous stew. Its grim handle gristled in strained grip, curving and turning as the killer carved.

It wouldn't do to risk the possibility of revival. Zane would pay the price, as his spouses had done.

And the payments would continue, multiplying toward midnight, until healing took hold and love thrilled the heart once more.

Upstairs waited the packet. Keys, maps, agendas, the naming of the couple.

Not that this last was more than a curiosity.

One couple alone would not suffice.

Nothing near.

Still, they were names to bear in mind if ruin threatened and they fell to hand.

Fronemeyer's wristwatch, upside-down and spattered, read 6:20. Time to move on. The worn cushions soaked up his blood. But the stairs beckoned.

Music rose out of memory's ashes, slap'n'smack mixed with terrified slow-shuffling embraces on the dance floor.

Moving on, feeling high, sailing toward fated waters.

Tonight would be beautiful indeed.



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