

#### 4. Relinquishment

Tweed Megrim twirled before the mirrored door of her rumble-back closet. A pink-sequined vision twirled there in reverse.

Such fluffery looked weird on her, yet she found it strangely beguiling.

She knew her boyfriend felt likewise about his tuxedo. She and Dex were Christmas baubles, gussied up for one another, for public display, and, God help them, for potential sacrifice. It gave Tweed a whole heap of scaring.

To be honest, it thrilled her too.

Dex. Dear Dex.

Elsewhere in the house, Daddy was singing as always a happy song. Visions of Dexter Poindexter swam dreamily before her. Awkward in lobeplay, a heartmelt whenever they engaged in secret bouts of flay'n'heal, Dex was the guy she wanted to cling to forever.

Soon he would arrive.

Tweed scrutinized her face and hair. Not a strand out of place, her complexion peach-perfect all over, her lips bowed and demure.

Condor Plasch, arm in arm with Blayne Coom, intruded on her thoughts. The pierced-in zippers along *their* lips made her shudder.

Pierced skin was one thing. But one's lips were permanent, neither growing nor healing with the removal of earring or barbell. Once disfigured, they remained so.

Worse rumors had spread about Altoona and Pimlico, a couple of female punks who had the hots for Condor and Blayne. What *they* had done to themselves . . .

Her father knocked.

The door opened a crack. "Hon?"

"It's okay," Tweed said. "Come in."

Daddy lumbered through the door like a burly brown bear. "Tweed, O Tweed, my daughter Tweed," he sang, "I saw your boyfriend's car pull up. And by the bye, you move the night to tears."

Daddy looked none the worse for his non-stop activity: dropping her kid sister off at school for parking duty (Jenna's prom was a year away, but a healthy streak of morbidity had drawn her to



the periphery of this one), and spending an exhausting day at the mall with Tweed, having to put up with the consumerist orgasms of screaming mallgoers, not to mention the tiny squeakers Tweed had done her best to squelch.

She gave her dad a peck on the cheek. "I'll be down in a minute."

He trilled an okay and was gone.

For the umpteenth time, Tweed gave herself the once-over.

Downstairs, a doorbell chimed.

The lights in the mirror seemed suddenly to dim. A premonition passed through her.

Out of hundreds of couples—those that had naturally coalesced and the pairs decreed by the principal the week before—she and Dex had been chosen.

Tonight was their last night on earth. They would be murdered by some teacher, a colleague of her father's and maybe a favorite of hers, oh let it not be Claude Versailles.

Laid before the Ice Ghoul, they would bleed and release. Then, as midnight chimed, they would be hacked and fluttered into a frenzy of pieces, their blood staining survivors' garments, their sundered flesh sun-dried and saved as mementos of escape.

Tweed flushed.

Light rushed back in around her.

It *couldn't* be them.

The odds favored their survival.

The same odds favored *everyone's* survival.

In a rare moment of mean spirit, she wished that Cobra and Peach, the couple least liked by anyone at school, had been chosen. Then she nixed the thought, touched a fingertip to her friendship lobe for luck, and swished out the bedroom door.

Dex was standing near the piano in his white tux, holding a corsage, looking spiffed up and out of place and beautiful. As her father beamed and hummed, she let her boyfriend's warm lips cup the tip of her right lobe, then did likewise to him, a chaste gesture of public affection.

Above her left breast, Dex pinned the pastel carnations.

"Perfect, perfect," sang her father.

He whipped out his camera, a mercifully brief moment, Dex's arm around her and a goofy grin on his face. Snap. Whirr. Her father's song turned grim, a rolling barcarole: "If they kill you, you know, I'll just *have* to *kill* them *back*!"

People found her father's habitual singing strange. His history students especially. But though he claimed he had spoken normally before he turned twenty, his singing was all Tweed had ever known.

It seemed perfectly . . . well . . . like *Dad* to her.

"Don't worry, sir," said Dex. "We're not the ones. We can't be. But if we are, we'll survive it. I've been working on my moves. Any teacher who touches Tweed is dead meat."

Dex exuded more confidence than Tweed thought justified, but she blushed with pride.

Dad sang about the TV show *Notorious*, how they saved the yummiest executions for prom night. Tonight's fry of a pair of mass murderers promised to be extra special, he told them.

Then Dex shook his hand, assured him he would have Tweed back by midnight, and they were out the front door.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Oh, sure." Tweed swept her prom dress clear of the passenger door slam.

When Dex slid behind the wheel, she felt impelled to elaborate. "To tell you the truth, I'm scared. Not about the prom so much as about losing you. But if I have to go through this, and jeez I guess I do, you're the one I want beside me more than anybody in the whole wide world."

Dex kissed her. "Me too." His left hand gave her lobebag a quick feel. Tweed gasped at her sudden arousal and turned away. "Not here," she said. "Not yet."

He mumbled an apology.

"No problem," she said.

After the ordeal—once they had used the tiny cleavers hanging at their waists, once the mass fluttering had stained their clothing, their legs were danced to exhaustion, and they sat side by side parked on some bluff—only then would she sanction Dex's loving feints toward lobeplay. Perhaps she would initiate a few herself.

Dex fired up his coupe and grinned. "Your dad sure is hyped."

"He's nervous. He really hates prom night."

"Of course," Dex said. "There's you and your sister."

Tweed shook her head. "He's never liked it. We make it worse, of course, me being in jeopardy this year, Jenna next. But Dad contributes to the anti-slasher cause. Sometimes, he attends their meetings." She raised a finger to her lips. "Our secret."

"Sure thing." Dex signaled a turn.

"There's no telling with parents," he went on. My mom's really into dog-cracking. We went to a contest at the fairgrounds last week and she screamed her lungs out for this swung sheepdog. Poor thing didn't have a prayer against a Saint Bernard maneuvered by a Scotsman. At home,

Jesus the Lion is forever on her lips. She likes to shout at sit-com characters to 'throw the other fist.' But get her off by herself, just you and her? She's as quiet and kind and considerate as anybody you could name."

"I like your mom," Tweed said.

Dex took his eyes off the road. "She likes you too."

"I'm glad." She snuggled closer. "Do you think Mr. Jones'll make us play a lot?"

"Nah," said Dex. "He's rehearsed our butts off, but I think he'll do like last year. Give us a solid hour of playing, bust our chops, then let the seniors go, and play the remaining sets with a smaller group, him on trumpet—"

Tweed groaned. "He's so awful!"

"Old blubber lips." Dex laughed. "Around ten, he'll throw in the towel and give the rest of the night over to slap'n'smack and dreamy ballads off the turntable."

Tweed caressed Dex's tuxedo'd arm. "I hope he plays *loads* of dreamy ballads."

Dex smiled. "It's going to be a special night, isn't it?"

"We get past the ordeal, you *bet* it will be." She put lots of promise in her look. Elation rose in her sweetheart's eyes.

They had their whole lives ahead of them. Once the fear lifted, the chosen couple had been slaughtered and fluttered, and they knew what positions the killings at tomorrow's corporate picnics opened up, she and Dex could think about directions.

About the future.

About tripling up with someone known or not yet known, someone who would augment their twosome in a splendid new way.

"I love you, Dex," she said, and he shyly said, "Well shucks, me too, right back at ya."

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Gerber Waddell loved taking showers. Hot water thundered down. Nobody swatted his hand away from his naked sexlobe. And he didn't have to hide his anger behind a benign smile.

Gerber tugged at his roused lefty like a bell-pull. In his mind's eye, the generous lips of Jonquil Brindisi, teacher of big sins, teased his sexlobe.

This phantom Jonquil rose from the billowing steam, slurping him in, disgorging him. Her eyes hungered for payback.

Like a panther she padded before him, one hand spanning to finger her nipples, the other down-and-in where she rocked.

But as she sucked his lobe, her skin veined, red and cracked, falling in chunks to the stippled floor. The scalding water needled her until she bled, pain everywhere upon that gorgeous body.

Still, she endured it, her lips fixed on his pleasure, though every suck trebled her agony and plashed the floor hot with crimson.

"Eat it, you snooty little bitch!" he muttered. How she deserved her pain, after years of an aloofness that screamed, I'm better than any lowlife janitor.

Then Gerber Waddell rose heavenward, careful to damp down his howls of joy. Beating streams of water sculpted perfect orgasm from the oval of his mouth.

Drifting down, Gerber stayed with his hatred. Tiles cooled along his spine as he bent at the waist, a jogger stitched for wind. His hair twisted in thunderous waterfalls.

Past torments paraded by.

The corporate heights from which he had once judged others.

The picnic murder of a woman he had loved, his own hand on the knife, and a lethal slash at the jealous bastard who had contrived for her to be chosen.

The petitions.

The forgiveness.

Sojourns in white rooms where they pried out chunks of his brain, taught him docility, thrust a mop and a bucket into his hands. And, after many years, tools.

Tools had their uses. Lately, Gerber had pondered them, how they might express impulses too long damped down and denied.

He slammed the faucet shut. Blasts of water shuddered to a halt.

Gerber rumbled the opaque door open and snagged a towel off the rack. Them green-coated scumsuckers had made a mistake. For all their hacking and hewing, they had missed a spot.

The urge.

Mild Gerber, feeble yes-man at Corundum High.

He'd teach *them*. He'd whip their fannies. Any more cheek and he would reach into his utility belt and tin-snip their lovelobes off.

Gerber stood before the steam-coated mirror, savagely brushing his teeth. His left hand sawed vigorous and wild across his jaw. The fingers of his right hand stilted against the counter, bamboo shoots white with tension.

When he emerged, the Bleaks were watching TV in their bedroom at the end of the hall. Missus Bleak chirped, "Water okay, Gerber?" and he said "Yes'm, it was," a hand concealing his left lobe, a towel tucked about his waist.

Gerber went into his room, where Mister and Missus Bleak's grown son had lived. Blue-black janitor duds lay like a dead flat man on the bed, undies and socks beside them. Off days, he wore Salvation Army crap, clothes that felt more like him than these did. Deceptive comfort for the normals. Put Gerber in somebody else's house, somebody else's uniform. Peg him. Make him safe for mobocracy.

But when he wore thrift store hand-me-downs, his thoughts came more easily. And when he wore nothing at all, they tumbled about in his head, wild, nasty, and free. Lull the bastards. Put him in safe togs, slip a denim lobebag over his lefty.

But a game had two players, he thought. One day, one *night*, he would break a few rules and loose the demon again.

Maybe tonight. Prom night. A night of beauty and savagery. It would be easy to throw a wrench or two into the cogs. All it would take was simply to give in. To act, once more, upon those suppressed urges.

Gerber pictured Missus Bleak coming through the door. Like a pork-bomb, she flew straight apart, warming the air with outflung spews of gore as her pudgy face exploded.

Somehow, it made this more like home.

More inviting.

Shiverful, spineful.

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Mia Jenner gave her younger husband Bonn a look, then tossed barbs at Pelf, who sat cozy in his favorite armchair, pooled in lamplight.

"I can't believe you're doing that," she scolded. "Really, Pelf."

The older man peered over his glasses, one finger stuck in the library book. "Doing what?"

Exasperated eyes. "Reading."

"I read *every* night."

Bonn chimed in. "This is Fido's prom night. He'll be down soon in his tuxedo. Bowser will be showing up in *his* tuxedo. Look at you, sitting there in your robe and slippers."

"Like this was any old weekend," added Mia, snaking an arm around Bonn's waist.

"To hell with Bowser McPhee." Pelf's familiar grin slung above his jowls. "*I luxuriate* on Saturday nights: a soothing bath, a good book, a tumble in the hay and a perfect lobesuck with you two fine folks." He brushed aside the world. "People make too much of prom night. Let Fido and Bowser have fun, let blood be spilt, but for gosh sakes, let lovable old Pelf read his thriller."

Mia turned to Bonn. "He's begging for it."

"I think so too." Bonn eyed the instruments of pleasure on the coffee table.

"Isn't he begging for it?" asked Mia.

Bonn reached to retrieve.

A pair of stiff riding crops stuck out from between his fingers like black leather drumsticks. "Yes honeybunch, no question."

He handed Mia her weapon of choice.

"I'm *not* begging for it," Pelf insisted, grinning as he closed his book.

He probed deep into the cushion crack and coaxed out a hand-tooled, vegetable-tanned, sharkskin beauty, the riding crop his spouses had given him on his fiftieth birthday. Despite eleven years of wear, the thing had staying power and a humming *thwack* that sang of quality. It shone with crusted weltflow. Pelf gripped its handle and hunched forward.

Bonn said, "Let's get him," and charged in.

Mia followed, raising her lustiest yowl to the rafters. Her crop whistled down hard on Pelf's terryclothed buttocks as he rose to meet his attackers.

Back into the armchair they drove him, riding its floorward arc but not missing a battering beat as they tumbled across the carpet.

Mia lost herself in gaiety and torn clothing, ending up in her favorite position: cushioned by soft pillows, plugged below, her crop hand free to punish her lovers.

Bonn crouched to rouse her as his lickables bobbed hot against her lips.

Their laughter stopped when Fido yelled, not for the first time, "Dad, Mom, Dad. Bowser just drove up."

Mia, unBonnaing her mouth, angled toward her son. Spiffed and slicked to steal the heart of any youngster, Fido, class clown, stood there waiting for his special night to begin.

Door chimes rang out *bing-bong-bing-bong*, followed at once by Bowser McPhee's irritating shave-and-a-haircut rap.

The skin on Pelf's shoulder was red and raw. He slipped out of her, pulled about himself the tatters of his bathrobe, cinched it, and said he would get the door.

Mia righted the armchair and sat down.

She'd be *damned* if she would bother getting up to greet a belligerent little no-account like Bowser McPhee.

She touched the gaping flesh of one welt and made sizzling-lips sound and a face of pain. As the door opened, her fingers shot up to check her left lobe.

No problem, nothing showing, bag in place. But it never hurt to be sure.

Bowser McPhee was as fleshy and dark as ever. "Good evening, sir. Good evening, sir." He waved at Mia and she nodded. "Ma'am."

Fido came into the creepy kid's arms as they traded perfunctory right-lobe kisses.

Her husbands engaged in small talk, half-nods and smiles in her direction, until her son and his date were out the door. Mia crossed her legs. Her fingers fidgeted on the chair's arms.

Bonn misinterpreted. "Worried?"

"Nope," she said. "My son's from a charmed line. Fido will come home with a choice slice of flesh in his Futterware. But my God, he could do so much better than Bowser McPhee."

"Bowser *is* a bucket of slime, isn't he?" said Pelf. "But our boy is young. He's testing the waters. I don't believe the McPhee kid will be his final choice."

"We shouldn't have picked a dog's name," said Mia.

Bonn spoke up. "Something more normal may have helped."

Easy for Bonn to say, thought Mia, since he had had nothing to do with the decision.

"Dog names were all the rage back then," said Pelf in their defense. "Mia and I had no way of knowing. Besides, we've met plenty of Rexes and Spots, even another Fido our son's age, who have all been super kids. Nope, I don't think his name's the problem."

After a glum pause, Bonn offered, "At least he has a date. The school didn't have to pair him up."

"Small favors," Mia said. Her younger spouse was a handsome brute, juicy with passion, but his mind was as limp as week-old lettuce.

"Don't worry," said Pelf, massaging her shoulders. "He'll turn out fine."

"Once he dumps that walking embarrassment."

Pelf gave Mia's right cheek a resounding swat, raising a blush there. "For the love of Christ, sweetie, relax. Fido has more sense than people credit him with. Sure he's in tight with Bowser McPhee now. But it's more a buddy-buddy thing than love, from what I can see."

Mia took the hand that had struck her. "You think so?" She raised it to her mouth and bit deep into Pelf's thumb. Blood welled bitter upon her lips.

Pelf winced. "I'm betting that Fido goes into the prom with his eyes open and scavenging. Jesus, honey, that hurts."

Mia reseated her jaw and hit the nerves, again, again.

Bonn, having stripped off his lobebag, now fumbled at the drawstrings of Mia's.

Pelf seethed upon a savage in-breath. He lifted his wife's hand toward his face so that her fingers claimed the dangle of his lobebag, a taut tug and rustle as it shimmied down and off.

For as long as their dalliance lasted, all thoughts of Mia's son, and what might happen to him at the prom and beyond, quite deserted her.

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Peyton "Futzy" Buttweiler, for thirty years the principal of Corundum High, sat alone in his office.

The rolltop desk, his bookshelves, the stark paneling that covered the office walls, were all a dark delicious rosewood. This place was Futzy's arena of shame. So it had been for twenty years, since his daughter's prom.

That year, Kitty's final year of high school, Futzy had refused all knowledge of who the victims would be. The handful of teachers in the know had displayed nothing but impenetrable pokerfaces.

Futzy had had them dismissed or transferred, the image of Kitty, slain and fattered, burning into his brain.

Propped on his desk blotter, Kitty's senior picture was framed in fake-gold. The velvet fuzz at its back bore a shine from frequent handling.

Funny how, when her portrait lay facedown in his desk drawer, Futzy's office hummed with academic concerns. But as soon as he raised it into view, this place became a sanctuary of guilt, a quiet confessional, all of his administrative woes momentarily set aside.

It wasn't the dark dress, angled tastefully between shoulders and cleavage, that caught his attention. Neither was it her matching lobebag, the firmness of her young flesh, nor the sweet innocence of that hope-filled gaze into a future she would never live.

No, it was the knockout impact of the whole, the way it brought back a world of promise taken from him in one vicious night. Kitty had been its linchpin, her natural vibrancy infusing him and his wives, Freia and Keech, with what had seemed a deep and abiding commitment to their marriage.

When Kitty and her date were carried lifeless to the Ice Ghoul at the center of the gym, Futzy had borne for hours the sight of her slain body.

At midnight, the cleavers had come out.

Futzy Buttweiler sat among the chaperones a destroyed man, watching in disbelief the mayhem.

When he came home that night, it felt as if their house were kept together with spit and baling wire. Worse, his gradual drift away from Freia and Keech—long unsuspected beneath their shared happiness in Kitty—made itself plain.

Two weeks later, they left him.

His new wives Futzy had found lurking outside the bereavement clinic waiting to snag some guilt-eyed masochist. They had pounced, Futzy had let them pounce, and from that moment his house had become an abattoir of love.

Drive to school.

Bark admonitions and orders over the PA system.

Preside at assemblies where he would introduce a speaker and sit there despising the wretched rabble.

Cuff, swat, batter, and smack the foul little shits sent to his office for misbehavior.

The weary round had been enough to satisfy. That and a properly distant commiseration every year with the dead promgoers' parents, a perfunctory few phone calls between the slaughter and the fluttering.

As he listened to their sobs, their quavering pride in son or daughter, he wondered if they felt one-tenth of the agony he, in renewal, felt every time he made such a call.

He would go home, post-prom, and let his wives rip into him, savage pain doled out, pain that often involved neither lobes nor gens.

But this year was different.

The Ice Ghoul had somehow fit perfectly into the underseas theme of Kitty's prom. For hours, the creature of tin foil, mesh, and papier-mache had towered over the slain couple. Icicles thrust into his little girl's eyes had capped the hidden mayhem of her death.

Year after year, in deference to Futzy's feelings, prom planners had shied away from the Ice Ghoul as a centerpiece, even as the tradition of using him to scare the vinegar out of incoming Corundum High kids caught hold.

But the world had darkened.

Devolving breeds of senior had turned more cruel.

Futzy peered into Kitty's eyes. Innocence. Kindness. Nothing like that existed any more at Corundum High.

This year, over Brest Donner's objections, the student committee had in defiance chosen the Ice Ghoul. They had even appropriated an area of the cool room, among ineptly butchered haunches of beef and pork, Lily Foddereau's senior projects, to store ice sculptures of the monster for a late-evening contest.

The little shits were not going to get away with this outrage. They would pay in spades for this nose-thumbing.

Futzy had shone no upset. He had remained a miracle of calm. At tonight's prom, he planned to continue in that vein, at least at first.

"Am I doing the right thing, sweetheart?" he asked his daughter's portrait. "Is Daddy on the right track?"

Typhoons of assent raged in his head, as they did whenever he posed the question. Over Kitty's permed helmet of auburn hair, from the strands of which peered a baby-soft right earlobe, a diffuse halo of light shone.

Yes, he would sour their evening.

Soon, though not soon enough, they would wish they had kept their Ice Ghoul as nothing more than a joke to frighten wide-eyed tenth graders with.

Futzy recalled Kitty's mothers, a rising duet of wincing squeals as he whipped them, the joyous anger that billowed inside him as he meted out their begged-for punishment. Hen scratchings. The *nertz* of a gnat at the ear. Nothing compared to the rage now astir in him, a rage he thought had dissipated in the years since Kitty's death, but which, it was now clear, had only lay dormant, waiting for its main chance.

He gripped the knot of his tie. Too loose. He tightened it.

This, thought Futzy, was going to be one humdinger of an evening.

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Rhythming behind the wheel of her high-tuned piece of crap, Altoona tooled down the main drag of Corundum, Kansas.

The radio blasted slap'n'smack, tweedling her ears straight down to the lobes. Ballsy Pink Lady rockers scalloped out come-need there. Inside her leather pants, their voices tweedled her gens.

Zipper teeth, sewn along Altoona's labia at Easter and bunched up now like a slumped toddler's jacket, spit fire across her vulval gap.

She prided herself in being able to sing and sway and pummel the steering wheel with rhythmic slams of her right palm, even as she obeyed every damned traffic law on the books.

Sheriff Blackburn passed Altoona going the other way. In response to her cheery wave, he glared and made an abrupt turn-it-down gesture.

Huh. Blackburn.

He was cool though. It didn't tear her. For reasons beyond her ken, Blackburn had chosen to play a stern-daddy role. But inside, he was a good and fair humper of his mother.

Not like some of the geekoids she and Pimlico had had to teach how to behave.

Chub jokes and female-threesome innuendoes rolled off their backs. The Mathers twins, for instance. Less than head lice they'd been in their attempts to draw verbal razors across the girls' brains.

But as soon as she and Pim heard how Ig and Opie Mathers had bullied Nils Fancher, they invoked their November pact, secured the testimony of reliable witnesses, tracked the slugnuts down, told them what was about to happen and why, and flogged the living shit out of them to within a hair's breadth of what the law allowed.

Ig and Opie's flesh had sizzled beneath a white-hot brand, high flutes of pain issuing from split lips as U for Unkind seared deep into their foreheads.

It had been nothing like the violence normal people dole out to remind one another that life is cool, that they're alive, and that they have "a whipped kind of love to share," as the Pink Ladies so righteously belted out on the radio.

Altoona sang along.

Nearly too late, she spied the street sign. She turned wide on a *screeech*—what the hell, nothing coming her way.

Pimlico's house was five down on the right, where Stardust Place teed in. She roared into the driveway, jerked up hard on the brake, and killed the engine.

The sound of her black leather skirt shifting over the seat was covered by a vigorous shake of trees outside the car. That and the blare of a TV inside Pim's house turned the night as crisp and alive as cathedral air.

On the umpteenth ring, one of Pim's moms came to the door. It was the scraggly one, whose hair reminded Altoona of tossed straw.

"Oh yeah, right," she said, "come in."

She was thin and naked, fresh welts raised across her belly. Dark puffy bags slung beneath her eyes—not the morning hangover ones that fade with coffee, fresh air, and locomotion, but the sort that endure and define. A hastily pulled-up lobebag hid her lefty.

In the vestibule, the straw-haired mom angled her head back as if readying a sneeze. Her mouth widened. "*Pimmie! Your date's here!*" A wasted gaze at Altoona. "She'll be down."

"Thanks."

Pim's pop shouted from the TV room, "*Hey, Nola. Get your scrawny ass in here!*" Nola was already on the move. "I'm coming fast as I can, buttfuck," she mumbled, casting an all-men-are-scum look toward Altoona.

Pim yelled, "Be right down!"

"*Jesus, where the fuck you think you're going?*" Again the man's voice, apparently to Pim's other mom.

Altoona had never met her girlfriend's father. All she knew about him was that he cared not the whit of a shit about his daughters.

From the TV room, Pim's kid sisters made gross-out sounds. Altoona recognized the political spot. Oink-oinks blared from a hefty porker. Its throat caught on something. Then a blurt of spew hit an empty trough, replay, replay, replay. The camera jittered through a series of ugly jumpcuts as a stern DoleMoreCrap announcer intoned Fenny Boyle's sins.

And it was only primary season.

Things were certain to heat up, the vitriol

eating away at an already frayed political fabric, from now to November, Jesus God!

Onscreen, Fenny Boyle's digital clone, as convincing as technology could make him, knelt and (the kids fake-wretched again) bobbed, coming up with a dripping grin of brownish gunk and saying, "Mmmmm, tastes great!!!"

Passing it off as true wasn't as important as convincing voters it was a plausible scenario—*that* was what the game was about.

Pim's other mom burst into view, naked as well but with fewer welts. She pumped Altoona's hand, her lobes right out there in plain sight. "How ya doin'?"

As urbane as Altoona prided herself in being, she was always startled to see Britt Franken's left lobe exposed like that, wet with recent chewing.

But she liked Britt a lot.

There was plenty of heart behind her hard-edged exterior, and no room for bullshit.

Not waiting for Altoona's reply, Britt opened the hall closet, her reach stretching the blue-veined backs of her thighs and lifting her right foot off the carpet. When she turned, two items were squat-towered in her hands, a yearbook and a dated Futterware container, the orange-lidded kind that had been popular when Pim and Altoona were in grade school.

"*For shit's sake, Britt, you gotta see this!*" More a command than a suggestion.

"*In a minute, you smelly heap of sewage,*" said Britt, her last phrase dropped way low and delivered with a grin in Altoona's direction.

Britt's hands worked at the lid.

"He loved me then. Kent Bodeen and Mimsie Chesk were chosen our year, pretty much nothing-people nobody in the class gave a damn about, so it worked out pretty well. The Frankenburger in there," Britt indicated the TV room, "kept looking over at them once they were draped out for all to see. He kept talking strategy, talking about the hunks of flesh he'd go after. His hands, when he wasn't fondling me, drifted to his cleaver. 'Just slice off something good,' I told him, 'something our kids can be proud of.' And when midnight struck, my fella dove straight in and got us some upper lip and the tip of, I'm not fooling now no not a bit, Mimsie's left earlobe."

Sure enough, as the lid drew back, a hefty lobe, shrunken in the process of being preserved and capped at the stump like a rabbit's foot, lay there in all its glory. It may or may not have been a lefty. But right or left, the *possibility* that he had slashed through to hack off a dead student's lobebag, claimed the coveted tip, and not kept it himself, spoke volumes about their puppy love.

"Wow!" said Altoona.

Britt nodded. "Don't it just beat all?"

Upstairs a door slammed.

"*Hey, little miss fat fuck, my lefty's throbbing and my whip hand's getting real itchy.*" Deadly warning.

"*All right, all right.* Gotta go. You two chickies have a swell time." She shrugged at the blood-smeared yearbook in her hands, resealed the Futterware, replaced both items in the closet, and buttocked off out of sight.

"Pretty sorry excuse, ain't she?"

Altoona turned to her descending date.

The pain having at last subsided in her crotch, Pim's sexy slink was back. She wore fishnet stockings, a tight black killer dress that ended a hand's breadth above her knees, and a face whose frail wounded wince burned deep in Altoona's heart.

"Your mom's not all that bad."

Scrunch about the eyes: "Give me a break." A cleaver dangled beside the Futterware on Pim's hip.

"Uh, sure, sweets," said Altoona.

"On second thought, give me a hug."

Leather brushed against leather as Pim cozied into her arms and angled up, engulfing in sweet lip-warmth Altoona's friendship lobe.

People said the lobes weren't connected. But she'd be damned if, every time her girlfriend's mouth closed on her right lobe, she didn't feel heat tingle in the left.

"You're walking just fine, hon."

Pim shrugged. "I took longer to heal than you, I guess. Last night helped."

Altoona remembered wet slides of niobium cathedraling at either side of her mouth as she softly dug for the love nub between. "Yum. You were okay a *week* ago, from what I could see."

"Yeah, possibly. But I didn't want to tear anything before Cabrille checked me out one last time."

Altoona laughed. "She was really coming on to us."

"Again!" Eyes wide for emphasis.

"Right."

"Cabrille's good. You can tell when she touches you, when she slips the needle in and explains how to clean the piercings and put on the Polysporin. But man, the way she looked at us that night . . . ."

"Yeah, it was pretty sick."

Altoona had held Pim, comforted her, wiping drops of sweat from her brow, and knowing as the woman proceeded upward—left right, left right, like a saleswoman threading bootlace—that she would be next.

Cabrille, thirty miles away in Topeka, showed, even that night, a glimmer of interest beyond professionalism. But years and a life (Altoona suspected) too weird to contemplate had put the bag-breasted, crow-footed piercer beyond the reach of desire.

Besides, she *was* a woman, and a female threesome was illegal, not to mention yucky even to contemplate.

"She must've thought we were pervies."

"Yeah," Altoona said, "or potential ones."

"Some folks don't listen," said Pim, taking Altoona's hand and leading her out into the cool quiet night. "I told her about Condor and Blayne, how we thought their mouths were way cool when they showed up all swollen and pus-y from Christmas break."

"*They* sure took a razzing."

"Kids and teachers both." Pimlico opened the passenger door. "But folks changed their tune when everything healed up and Blayne started to work his zipper, slow and idle, right there in history class."

Altoona settled behind the wheel. "He kissed me, you know."

"The heck he did." Pim peered over to test her. "Oh bullshit! You're such a bullshitter!"

"He *did!*"

"Yeah, right." She slid closer. "Was it like this?" Pim's feisty bod overlaid hers, her fingers up under Altoona's lobes, her lips coming down to pillow against her mouth.

Pim broke the kiss, smiling, her right hand drifting down to grope Altoona's leather-mounded left breast.

"More metal in it," said Altoona. "More tentative, but real sexy. We were between classes."

"The *fuck* he kissed you. Did he really?"

"You'll see." She fired up the rattletrap, giving it extra pedal to make to vroom. "I wanted to surprise you. They're in a receptive mood. I got 'em horny for the big fourway."

"*Both* of 'em? Oh bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!" She hit the seat with the flat of her hand. "Come on Altoona, I don't like it when you tease."

"It's not a tease. We set it up. During the search for the dead couple, in the costume shop behind the stage. All you've gotta do is bring along your enthusiasm and your killer bod."

Pim countered with a renewed volley of bullshits, but it was clear she was starting to buy in. Altoona hoped Blayne had been able to persuade Condor, and that what both she and Pim longed for might begin tonight.

She flashed again upon their piercer, on Cabrille's calculated ramblings about the delights of female threesomes. No, they weren't pervies by *that* standard, but Altoona guessed more than a

few prudish eyebrows would be raised—and the law brought thundering down—were word to leak that a foursome was in the offing amongst those who had bought big-time into the zipper craze.

Well fuck 'em, she thought, zooming backward into the street from the driveway. Love was love, whatever shape it took. Praise be to God for a world that could produce Pimlico, and praise abounding for the possibility of digging their talons into two super guys like Condor Plasch and Blayne Coom, brilliant, weird, dark, brooding sons of their mamas' most bizarre and urgent dreams.

"Hang on, hon," Altoona said. She pushed on into the promise of night, her brain radiant with possibility.



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