

5. High School Secured

There was a split focus in the cabinet room: the video screen that covered an entire wall, and President Hargill Windfucker's asinine comments.

Although the Shite House video feed was and would remain private, famed sportscaster Blennuth Ponger had, this year, been shanghaied into the role of TV announcer. Ponger's laconic delivery betrayed his feeling that he was clearly out of his league.

"Here come the seniors."

Long silence.

"Our saucy little Home Ec teacher, behind the wheel of her killer car, is just a mile from Choke Cherry High."

Long silence.

"Right here, beneath this scrawled number, a big black fifty-seven, will the chosen couple meet their destined fate."

That sort of thing.

President Windfucker filled in Ponger's long stretches of silence with "Cute couple o' kids" or "That Home Ec gal's out for bear, isn't she?"

Whenever Cholly Bork voiced these inanities, angling the strings so that the presidential head shifted thoughtfully, the twelve cabinet officers turned from the screen and toward Gilly Windfucker to murmur and mutter "Very cute" or "She sure is, Mister President."

They sounded like churchgoers mumbling the phrases of a litany. They looked like spectators at a tennis match.

In her shiny red sports car, Karn Flentrop preened for the camera. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, her nails long and pearl-sheened as the steering wheel rotated this way and that. She came to a stop, yanked up on the handbrake, and slid her sultry legs out of the car, taking the elevator to the backways as she patted her perm.

"Her moment of glory," mused Windfucker.

"Glory indeed, Mister President."

Camera switch. The young victim, a fresh-faced boy with much promise and no future, was helping his date out of the car, swish of a prom dress, her hand lifted like a swan's neck to his. The shot of them as they crossed the parking lot and entered the school wasn't the clearest, but it was critical not to arouse their suspicions.



Gilly Windfucker noted, "That gal would have made somebody a wonderful mom. Nice lobes on her, she's packing quite a pair."

"It's a crying shame, sir." "She's a gem." "Her young man could be in pictures." "They make us proud to be Americans."

As the doomed couple passed through locker-lined hallways to the gymnasium, Blennuth Ponger launched into the usual canned bios. In the upper right part of the screen, an inset series of stills and home videos tracked their childhoods, first steps, pony rides, birthday parties, theme park vacations.

"It kinda reddens the lobes, dunnit, watching them kids grow up, knowing what we're gonna see in a while, getting caught up in the anticipation?"

"It does, Mister President."

There was a hushed shuffle of chair legs upon the carpet as the twelve followed the President's lead and started to stroke their sexlobes through their lobebags.

They kept it up, turning their attention more intently toward the doomed pair and the tight fox who taught Home Ec. And thus did the presidential party slither down into the muck and goo of their private fantasies about this boy, this girl, and the buff teacher with murder in her eye and an itchy knife hand, compelling players in a national drama.

Weight against his left side.

That was the impression that first seeped in, that and the stench of death. The weight was warm and inert, in contrast to the cramped chill that wracked the rest of him.

The deadweight pressed down, then lifted free as cool air rushed in. His head was spinning. On every inhale, death smells rushed in to nauseate him and ride the next breath out.

He tested his eyelids. They cautioned open, lashes stuck, then free.

A vague notion of pipes swam high overhead. Crisscrosses of unpainted lumber. And blocking some harsh halo of light, the slumped form of a woman, dressed in finery, sitting on the side of whatever rough-edged coffin they had been jammed into.

"What . . . ," he tried, but only a modulated moan emerged.

The woman's head turned, partially uncovering a lightbulb. Its harshness delivered her profile, but with too sharp an edge to afford him a clear view of much beyond her dyed friendship lobe, some futile protest against the way things were.

He raised his fingers and wiped his eyes.

"You're awake."

His white stiff cuff came into view, as did the gold cross-gleam of cufflink backs and a coat arm's abrupt edge.

Accompanying the woman's words was a sudden certainty about where he was, memories of abduction and jail, a king's feast of food and a shower. Of submission to soap and scissors and being dressed.

And then the needle.

"But we're not—"

"Someone saved us," she said, standing up, one hand on the trough. "Saved us and did *him* in."

Working himself unsteadily to a sitting position, he followed the woman's gaze.

A bloated couch, stained crimson, cradled a dead man, the buffed hilt of a knife slanting up from his chest as if it had burst a huge balloon filled with raspberry jam.

The odor said otherwise, of course, mingled aromas of blurted heartpumps and the release of bladder and bowel.

"Poor boob ran into trouble," he said.

Rising, he spotted the dog.

"He deserved it," said the woman. "Christ, where's your head? He would've killed us. That axe lying on the floor was meant for us."

He nodded. "We got caught. Then *he* got caught."

"Damn deputy at the jailhouse nearly lost his nuts to my knee. If he hadn't had backup, I'd've gotten away."

"You from Topeka?" he asked.

"Kansas City. They surprised us at dawn."

"I thought I'd be safe behind the library. I wasn't. Do you think anyone's upstairs?"

"Doubtful," she said.

As the puffiness lifted from his head, he noticed her lobebag. His own state-provided bag knocked at the neck skin below his cropped lefty. He groped it, smooth cloth that no doubt matched his tux, and at the top, elastic and probably some kind of adhesive to clamp it lightly to the stub.

"Any idea how we lucked out?" he asked.

"My brain was real hazy, but I heard somebody say something, or *thought* I did. And I saw the killer's arm come up with a tightly gripped knife. A shirt of dark blue. Maybe denim."

Fear rushed through him. "You don't think he's upstairs?"

She laughed. "If he were, I'd shake his hand."

"He's probably a maniac. Maybe he's a black sheep wasting his entire family, and he's sitting upstairs right now at the kitchen table eating a sandwich." His voice fell to a whisper. "Maybe he's stopped chewing on account of now he can hear our voices and realizes we're not dead."

"You don't get it, do you? What we have here is one of the anti-slasher crowd who's decided to make a point: Kill the school's designated slasher. Crash the prom. Then, when no couple is slaughtered, reveal the deed and deal another blow to a savage system of sacrifice. What we've got to do is support him. We need to go to the prom, hang out through the time allotted for the killing and the search, and reveal ourselves once nobody's killed and our guy stands up and gives his speech."

She's joking, he thought.

Then it occurred to him that she was serious.

"Are you crazy?" he asked. "Even if you're right, we'd become martyrs along with the killer."

"I don't think so. We'd be national heroes. There might be a trial. But we'd be too hot to convict, and we're certainly not accomplices to his crime. Then there'd be speaking and signing tours—"

"Signing what?"

"Our book of course. I'm Winnie Hauser, by the way." A hand shot out. His rose and he let Winnie shake it. "The barbarity of prom night would be over and there'd've been created a link between housed and homeless that maybe just might get people's attention."

"You *are* crazy."

"There'd be food and warmth, showers and a fresh change of clothes every day dependably. The anti's would see to it. We would be their poster children. And when the power shifted, we'd be in an ideal spot to make sure things were done right."

He considered.

Then he shook his head, the dummy lobebag tapping stupidly at his neck. "I'll tell you what *I'm* going to do. I'm going to take this dead guy's cash, a closetful of clothes, and as much food as I can cram into his car, and head south, to Fort Lauderdale maybe. Give up your stupid dreams, that's my advice, before you get killed."

She tacked upon him. "If I'm wrong about our savior, they'll think we butchered Poor Mister Teacher and they'll come after us. They'll catch us. And the tortures they put us through will seem unending. Even after they've exposed and frayed our nerve ends to the edge of boredom, they'll hang onto us for the next prom night so they can slowly juice us on *Notorious*. And while . . . hey wait . . ."

Shit. She'd noticed.

"Come over here. Into the light."

He didn't move.

Winnie grabbed his arm. Yanking him toward the bulb, she turned his head and stared at his right ear.

He avoided her eyes, knowing what she saw.

Not the smooth stub of normal folks, but the imperfect tuck, like the knot atop an orange, of a dodger.

"You're a promjumper," she said. Contempt there. His silence confirmed it. "You grew up among them, attended their schools, enjoyed every advantage . . . and then you ran!"

"Spare me the litany," he said, pulling away. "I chickened out, okay? I paid and paid plenty."

Pursuit, capture, and two savage lobectomies raced through his memory.

Winnie approached him.

Softer: "What's your name?"

"Brayton. Kittridge."

"Well, Brayton Kittridge," her hands were warm on his neck, "this is your chance, don't you see, to make things right again. You come with me, confront the demons of the prom, and you can redeem the past. But if you shy away, I promise you, when they track us down and torture us and we find ourselves strapped in on *Notorious*, I'm gonna fix you with such a glare of hatred as we burn, that it'll put their physical torments to shame.

"And I can do it, too!"

Poor feisty woman. Winnie thought she could read him and fix him—fix ordinary folks too, no doubt—as easily as she might mend a broken toy.

But he had been there.

Unlike Winnie, who had been brought up among the proudly rejected and knew nothing of the ones who rejected her, he understood their vile little hearts, the beast she expected to confront and best in one night.

Without him, she would do something dangerous, maybe even try to attend the dance unchaperoned.

"I . . . I guess you're right," he said, noting the attractive combination of strength and naivete in Winnie's eyes. "We'll give it a try. Oh but what about these?" He fingered his right stub and her pale-green friendship lobe, liking the way hers felt.

"I'm betting there's a supply of Tuffskin somewhere in the house, give you some heft and cover my coloring," she said. "It's not ideal. But what with the subdued lighting at the dance, and given that we'll try to avoid others until the moment of revelation, it just might work. Come on, Brayton, let's look for it."

"Call me Bray," he said.

She huffed and grabbed his hand and yanked him stairward. He followed, admiring her thigh-swish and ankle-turn as they climbed the steps.

In the kitchen, the air cleared of death stench. But there were whiffs of gore that didn't vanish even when he closed the cellar door, and a quick search of the house brought them face to face with the teacher's wives.

"I think," said Bray, staring down at the fresh corpses, "we ought to consider revising our opinion of our savior."

"Poor things," said Winnie. "But sometimes pawns must be sacrificed for the greater good. He had to kill the teacher. Maybe these two put up a struggle."

"Does it *look* like they struggled? Phew, it's amazing how quickly dead folks start to stink. Besides which, why didn't he just truss them up? Why didn't he lock that guy down there in a closet or something, roped many times over as tight as a mummy so he had no way to escape?"

"Beats me." She picked up a packet from the end table. Its contents started to spill out the open end, but Winnie caught them in time. "Instructions for the designated slasher."

"I think the wacko family member theory is starting to make a lot of sense. Either it's totally coincidental our couch guy was murdered tonight, or his being chosen as slasher finally drove, I don't know, maybe his son over the edge."

Ignoring him, Winnie leafed through the documents.

"I bet the killer's hundreds of miles away by now."

Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle.

"He won't be anywhere near the prom."

Winnie glared at him. "Either way," she said, "no couple will be sacrificed tonight. So either we'll back what our savior has to say; or, if he doesn't show, we'll step forward to put our best spin on the student slaughter that wasn't."

End of discussion.

"While you've been standing there flapping your lips," she went on, "I discovered some things: The dead guy's name is Fronemeyer. An art teacher. Ah. Here's a map of the town. They've even circled the school for us, thoughtful of them. Corundum High."

No surprise. The deputies's shoulder patches had had "Corundum, Kansas" sewn into them.

"Here are the intended victims' names. Tweed Megrim and . . . Dexter Poindexter. Jeepers, what a name. And where they'll be sitting during the stalking phase. Now, while I find the Tuffskin, you use the phone book—there can't be too many Fronemeyers—and the map to figure out where we are in relation to the high school. Also, call the parents of these two kids and tell them their targeted darlings are safe."

That seemed pointless. "I don't think we—"

"Just do it," Winnie said. "The more committed anti-slasher folks we can count on coming out of this, the better. If I have to plant terror in the hearts of hundreds of complacent mommies and daddies, so be it."

She headed off.

It was a relief to regain the kitchen, away from the sight of neck slashes and the spills of blood that idled down the slain wives' bodies.

In a cabinet above the wall phone, Bray found the white pages. Thin. One Fronemeyer. Moonglow Street, so short its name ran its length, no more than four miles from school.

Finding the numbers for the Megrims and the Poindexters was just as easy. But mustering the will to dial them was another matter.

Winnie returned with a tub of Tuffskin in her hand, a prize from her rummage through bathroom cabinets. She carried as well a thick wad of bills and a set of keys on a chain, both of which she stuffed into Bray's pants pockets. "Well?"

Bray pointed to the map. "We're here. Over here's Corundum High. It's seven ten now. Apply the Tuffskin, let the stuff seal, hit the road at seven thirty, and we should be right on time."

"Did you call them?"

"Not exactly, I—"

"Wimp!" She grabbed the pad and punched in a number. Six rings. "That's right," muttered Winnie, "catch some fast food and go bowling while your son dies."

She hung up and punched in the other number, her index finger moving with strength and purpose. Ring one, ring two, ring three, followed by a click, and a singing voice, to which she began to say something, stopping when she realized it was a recording.

She drummed on the counter, then, "Yeah, hi, listen up. You don't know me, but your daughter Tweed and her date were chosen as tonight's prom victims. I have reason to believe they'll be spared. Trust me, this is not a hoax. You'll learn about it later this evening, but really now . . . don't you think you should have done more to stop this outrage before it went this far?"

Winnie hung up. "That oughta jolt someone's complacency."

"You were unnecessarily cruel."

"Tell it to the judge, Mister Promjumper." She pried the lid off the tub and dipped a hand into the soft goo. "Turn your head left." It burned going on, but Bray felt it harden and penetrate his skin as she kneaded and shaped it.

Thinned, Tuffskin concealed blemishes.

Applied more thickly, it gave heft to breast or cock.

A famous pianist had been said to extend his fingers this way, but anyone who understood music knew that had to be a wild lie.

"Now you do me," she said, "and by God you'd better get it right."

Her harshness had begun to amuse more than shame him, which was just as well. His hand held steady. He did his best to thin the Tuffskin and coat her lobe, concealing the pale green beneath

flesh tones. Curiously, the more it reminded him of the lobes of girls he had lusted after when he was whole, the greater the urge grew to kiss it.

He planted a light one.

Winnie drew back. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Kissing my date's friendship lobe."

"Don't you friendship *me!*" she retorted. "Let's see what's to eat. Ten minutes tops."

Bray visited the john first.

When he returned, Winnie had a variety of meats and cheeses laid out on the table, along with three types of juice. He lifted a Jonathan from the fruit bowl, alternating bites of mozzarella and apple and feeling how weird it was to have a fake lobe moving to match his concealed stuffed lobebag on the left.

He'd give anything, he thought, to have it be real, to have this prom be his abandoned prom nine years before.

Between bites, he tried to filter his breath through his hand. The stench of death made eating an iffy proposition. Winnie, a thin shapely woman of fierce determination, chowed down oblivious of the smell. Her eyes darted between the wall clock and the sheaf of papers.

Bray grabbed another apple. One bite in, his date announced that it was garage time and headed back through the house. He tossed the apple in the trash.

Winnie's instincts were unerring. At the end of the hall was the door to the garage, a standard three-car structure with a couple of cars and some boxes stacked against a side wall.

"Which one is least likely to have belonged to Fronemeyer?" she asked. "We don't want to rouse suspicions in the parking lot."

"This one's got to be his." Bray pointed to a newer foreign jobbie whose license plate frame read PAINTERS DO IT WITH ACRYLICITY. A parking pass hung from its inside mirror.

"Good guess. We'll take the other." She started to open the passenger door. "What are you doing?"

"Holding the door for you." Winnie looked creamy and scrumptious.

"Get the heck over to the other side of the car. And get serious, will you? There are three dead people inside that house. And we're on a mission to turn things around in this cockeyed world."

"Okay, okay, I'll drive."

"That's right. You drive, I ride, I do the thinking, you follow orders. It's that simple."

Sliding in beside her, Brayton *nit-nit-nitted* the garage door open.

In this light, Winnie almost looked like Bonnie Dolan, the date he had disgraced through his cowardice. Maybe if he pretended as hard as he could, he might save himself and counterbalance the misery he had put the Dolans and his parents through so many years before.

He leaned toward her.

"Watch it!" she said.

"Fine." He smiled. "But before this evening's over, I bet you're going to want to kiss me."

"Bet away. Dream on. Hit the road."

Brayton did.

All three.

Their babysitter had finked out on them, so they had her daughter Pill to contend with.

Even so, Trilby Donner thought that having the three of them, her and her spouses Bix and Brest, chaperone the prom was a swell idea.

In public Brest displayed much love for Bix, even as she spoke privately to Trilby of dumping him in favor of an all-girl threesome with Delia Gaskin. But Trilby felt that if only they could do more together as a triple and as a family, if they made the effort to identify common threads in their lives and intertwine them to gain tensile strength, their marriage was still salvageable.

That's why she insisted so vehemently that they take Pill with them. It was, she felt a great idea, despite her embarrassment when Bix passed a bribe to Elwood Dunsmore and the lynx-eyed student inside the door checking passes. Hush-hush, no need to let anyone know an eight-year-old was on the grounds, she would be mouse-quiet in the faculty lounge and out of sight as the slasher stalks.

Dunsmore, a coffee-skinned shop teacher with a bristle mustache and a bulbous friendship lobe, winked, okay'd his fingers, and folded the bills into his coat pocket. "That's called hush money," he told the junior, who nodded and said, "Yeah, we learned about that stuff in Mr. Versailles' class in the lesser vices."

Now Pill was being difficult.

"Why the long face, honey? I'll come in to check on you every half hour," Trilby assured.

The child kept her head bent, her pre-adolescent earlobes forlorn in their naked innocence. In three or four years, when puberty struck, her baby Pill would need to be fitted for a lobebag.

"You've got your books, Gigi the goat, and a nice plush chair. There's pear juice in the mini-fridge whenever you want it."

Whiny voice, yet thank God no tears: "But I want *you*, Mommy."

Brest and Bix stood by the door.

Trilby sensed them behind her, impatience and lovely interest intermingled. Later, in bed, she had no doubt they would use the delay caused by Pill's whining as an excuse to vent their pent-up affection toward her. And she would do her best to counter with her worn riding crop.

"You'll be a big girl, won't you?" she asked. "You'll take care of yourself?"

Pill nodded, hugging her stuffed goat.

"That's my girl. Now remember, if you hear footsteps, what do you do before the people come in?"

The corners of Pill's mouth flexed. "I miss Puff," she said. Puff was her kitty.

"What do you do?" repeated Trilby.

Pill looked glum. "Hide in the coat closet."

"That's right. In your little corner of pillows. Leave a tiny crack for air, and when you're sure they're gone, it's okay to come out again."

The faculty lounge was brightly lit and off-limits for the slaughter. Pill would, as Trilby had instructed her, keep her hands off the paper cutter and out of the supply drawer. Leaving her here would be perfectly safe.

"That's my girl," Bix offered.

Brest, beside him, said nothing.

Trilby kissed her index fingers and touched them to Pill's lobes. "Give your mommy a hug, honey."

Thick wool from Gigi the goat tickled Trilby's neck as her daughter's slip of a body moored against her and the butterfly mouth she so loved closed about the maternal tip of her friendship lobe.

Gerber Waddell arrived in his beat-up truck and his best coveralls.

As he crossed the parking lot and entered the school building, early promgoers gave him a wide berth. The teacher who sat at the front table, Mr. Dunsmore, and the short line of students being checked in ignored him.

Pond scum.

Oughta be snuffed, all of them.

Gerber went without ceremony to the supply closet near the band room. He used his ring of keys to let himself in.

It was close in here, the lone pull-bulb dim and dusty with age. Shelf upon shelf of tools and duct tape and extension cords in impossible orange tangles passed beneath his gaze.

Gerber paused.

Why am I here? he wondered. *There was a reason I came in here.*

Letting his fingers rise before him like so many pale stalagmites, he pointed them toward the school entrance and with great effort traced his steps until they were back where they had begun.

Oh yeah. Tin snips. An axe. An ice pick. A graduated, pan-piped pouch of screwdrivers.

He loaded his utility belt with these items, repeating their names over and over in a whisper until they dangled there.

Flag. Gotta do the flag.

Damned students didn't appreciate the work involved in the flag task. Mornings, they shot spitwads at him while the pulley at the top gave the odd groan and the parallel cords sang in high slaps against the flagpole and the heavy furls of the flag moved, jerk by jerk, into the sky like a huge slumbering dinosaur head roused from sleep.

Gotta take it down.

Night time comin' on.

Later, there would be blood to clean up, lots of blood.

And stray body parts from the fluttering, flung into ill-lit corners of the gym.

But the night was still young, and plenty of mayhem simmered across the brainscape of Corundum High's head janitor.

Gerber Waddell locked the closet. He paused outside in the hall to remember again where he was headed.

Some gussied-up young snotwads swished by, wide-eyed and agiggle. They made a joke at his expense, but Gerber paid them no never-mind.

Flag. Fuckin' Ol' Glory. Fuckin' flag.

Yep.

Sheriff Blackburn watched the flag rise, giving it a smart salute as the head janitor watusi'd beside the white flagpole, the *ling ling ling* of the pulls slapping metal.

This night flag, designed by an artist of his grandparents' generation, had gradually replaced the day version, unofficially and then by an act of Congress. When it was first introduced, some had called it sacrilege. But most folks honored truth when they saw it: Fifty gloom-white skulls on a field of blue, bloody furrows alternating with flayed flesh, the skulls like Honest Abe looking drawn and haggard in his last photos, the flayings like sexual lashes gone mad, the whole a vivid rendering of the nation's dark side, the nation dubbed the Demented States of America scarcely twenty years before by an otherwise forgettable pop musician. The moniker had stuck, gone into common parlance, and was used more often than the original now—except by the President, though he too lapsed at times into the vernacular.

"Hi there," said Gerber Waddell, ducking and nodding at the sheriff from the flagpole.

Poor halfwit always said, Hi there.

Irritating.

"Looking good, Gerber."

The janitor mumbled his thanks, a catch in his throat as he figure-eighted the twin cord about its stay and yanked it tight. Benign feeb. Gone nutso years back at a corporate picnic the day after prom night. Killed one more than the law and custom allowed. But some judicious brain slicing had redeemed what could be redeemed, and Gerber Waddell, with the aid of his guardians the Bleaks, had become once more a productive member of society.

"Take care now, hear?"

"Thank you, Mister Sheriff." Gerber nodded politely, a grin on his face. Then he picked up the triangulated day flag, did a one-eighty, and headed for the school entrance.

Young couples were cascading now through the double doors, bottlenecked at the table Blackburn had just left. He had entrusted a padlock to the bristle-lipped shop teacher, Elwood Dunsmore—the final padlock that would be snapped on right at the stroke of eight, no more students allowed in after that, no more anybody. The only keys were in the packet he had left with Zane Fronemeyer and on the ring of metal hanging from the sheriff's belt.

A limousine drew up to disgorge another young couple, fear and anticipation on their faces.

Blackburn clucked and shook his head. Waste of money, as far as he was concerned. Most people made do with their own vehicles, parking in the lot on his left. But there were always some, too extravagant for their own damn good, who saw fit to hire fancy-dan automobiles, hoping to impress their dimbulb classmates with a display of gold-plated rungs up life's ladders.

Yeah, he remembered the kind from his own high school days. One of that crowd had reached his last red-gold rung a tad early, on prom night. The sheriff had a dried piece of pancreas at home to prove it.

Blackburn crossed the grass on his left and found the sidewalk. From his right fist swayed three padlocks.

Kids with flashlights, sketched shadows in the darkness, waved cars in off the street and left or right along a gauntlet of volunteers who handled the parking proper. Overhead, a pallid moon drifted in and out of pewter-gray clouds.

Passing the iron-barred windows of several classrooms, Blackburn rounded the corner of the building and headed for the gym's emergency exit door. When one lock's hasp slid snugly into place there, its firm snap sealed off the exit as a means of escape. There would be no promjumpers on *his* watch, at least not the kind that signed in and slipped out.

High exuberant shouts erupted in the parking lot at the sheriff's back. He thought of his son and two daughters, how in two short years Blitz, a sophomore, would drive or be driven into this very parking lot for *her* prom. Yesterday, a slight injury in gym class had brought Daddy to school, where he received assurances from Nurse Gaskin and a handshake from Principal Buttweiler. The whole encounter had given Blackburn a chill.

But they said it built character, this prom ordeal. And *he* had survived it, him and his wives.

"Hello, Sheriff!" Kids passed by, crossing the lot, a hint of challenge in their voices, but respect too.

He raised a hand to them. "Be careful now, you hear? Don't go catching any stray knives!"

"We won't!" But they well might. Only a few teachers, and the principal of course, knew which couple would die tonight.

Two padlocks remained.

Blackburn hummed as he rounded the building's next corner, low bristly shrubs keeping him clear of the wall. The back entrance was used only by driver ed kids and those who lived north of the school. It yielded to his efforts, a sturdy door now made impassable.

Nobody here. He started to feel creepy in spite of himself. *Whistle a happy tune.*

Right.

He resumed his walk around the building. On the east side was an emergency exit from the band room, hidden in moon shadows. The floods on this side hadn't been flicked on!

Damn that dimwit janitor.

Every year for the last three, the sheriff had chewed Gerber out about this, making up some crap about ordinances, safety regulations. But the truth was, Blackburn would somehow always manage to spook himself by the time he got around to the back of the school on prom night.

No houses. Just some weeds and a fence, a lazy stream bubbling along behind it.

Detaching the flashlight from his utility belt, Blackburn trained it on the door. The padlock fell from his hands and clattered on the concrete. Then it was up again, a cool inverted U of metal sliding against metal, a solid steel snap that sealed off the school's east exit. Yes. How easy it was to feel satisfied by a simple sound.

Now to complete his journey around the school perimeter, get the hell out of here, and lambaste that dweeb janitor.

Someone touched him on the shoulder. The boy in him yelped. His skin bristled with fear as he whirled and went for his gun. Foolish gesture, on hold and relaxing even as he touched the gun butt.

Blackburn saw who it was. "Jesus Christ, don't you *ever* do that to me again!"

"Sorry, Sheriff."

"Creepy enough out here as it is." His hand returned to his side. "So, we meet again."

"Sheriff, I need your help." Oddly cool.

"You don't sound quite—"

His instincts flared. Then the dark arm rose, as though detached from its body's stasis, swiftly curving about and impossibly long.

A grimace betrayed the usually complacent face before him, exertion abruptly concentrated.

But before Blackburn could raise his hands to ward off whatever it was, the wind whipped up in the restless branches above him and an impossible weight snuffed all awareness swiftly out.



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