

8. Unclosable Wounds

"They're *on* to us," muttered Bray.

Block by block on the drive from Fronemeyer's house, Bray's fear had grown. Now, as they stood at the refreshment table, it felt as if it surely must blare.

"Get a grip," Winnie replied.

Though the paper plate he held was sturdy, not the thin pitiful bendy kind that buckles or lulls under the least weight, his hand trembled. He transferred cheese cubes to the plate, orange and pale yellow ones with frilled toothpicks, then a fistful of wheat crackers.

Across the food, a senior girl with hard eyes and perky lobes stared at him, then shifted her glare onto the cheerleader bubblehead chatterbox with whom she had entered the gym.

"We're not *blending*," Bray agonized.

"Stick with the program."

Behind her smile, Winnie was miffed.

By the program, Bray knew she meant the plan she had laid out on the way over, the cover story the fuzzy-lipped teacher at the entrance table had swallowed without question.

Yes, Winnie had told Old Fuzzy Lip, they were correspondence students, had driven a fair stretch to celebrate their graduation from Corundum High. And yes, much obliged to accept one of a small stack of generic packets and wait out the stalking in the girls' gym with the tenders. He hadn't even checked their names, the pinned passes enough verification for him, and a frantic press of young people close behind.

But dumb luck could only hold for so long.

Winnie guided them away from the refreshments toward a darker patch of gym, not too close to the kids yet not so distant that they stuck out.

"This is right," she said, through a steam-heat shimmer of music. "I can feel it."

Sapphires, dark and gleaming, drifted across her face. It amazed him. Winnie was in her element here. She really believed they would pull it off, that tonight they would save the world.

"We're going to have our heads handed to us." He bit into sharp cheddar, wishing for apples to augment.

"You *are* a coward, aren't you?"



"Hey, never beaten, never flayed."

Between them and the Ice Ghoul, a few brave early couples danced, close and clingy. Many more were bleached and bunched, plates and cups in hand, nibbling, sipping, and trading sick jokes.

A couple of chaperones circled the sculpted figure, a tall man and a shapely woman. Teachers, Bray guessed. Their shoes moved in and out of a rolling blanket of fog.

"The killer's nearby," said Winnie. "I can feel it."

"Our hero."

"He saved our lives."

"Three murders. So far. That's quite the humanitarian walking among us. I can't wait to shake his hand."

Tugging at his right lobe, the tall man nodded to the shapely woman without shifting his gaze from the rampant red Ice Ghoul. She broke off, her eyes suddenly on Bray and Winnie, and headed their way.

"I can see you're determined to be difficult, no matter how—"

"Save it," he broke in. "I believe we're about to have company." He made a point of not glancing at the approaching woman, hoping she'd veer off.

Winnie said, "I'll do the talking."

But the woman charged in. "Pardon my social ineptitude," she said, pumping Bray's hand. "Excuse my nosiness, but I can always spot grads-by-mail a mile away. You are . . . ?"

She stared right into him, a bold beautiful face with thick rich lips and lobes that sang.

"I, um, Brayton is the name," he said, out before he could warn himself to mumble something or to make up a name.

He was a goner, and Winnie would be dragged down too, just as, years before, Bonnie Dolan had fallen with him when they'd jumped the prom.

But the woman seized on his name, a snag in her head as she mulled.

"Brayton, Brayton," she said, an internal Rolodex flipping, then, "of course, Brayton Con-something, Connors, no Conyers! I had you last fall. Miss Brindisi? The Greater Vices, Pride, Anger, and Lust?"

"Of course," he said. "A wonderful class."

"And you must be our *other* student from Coffinville, Bray's co-worker, Raven Barnes." She shook Winnie's hand.

"That's right," said Winnie, matching the woman's brazen stance.

For one of society's outcasts, Bray thought, Winnie was admirably feisty.

"I'm pleased to welcome you both. I always find more in common with correspondents than with the youngsters."

"We have more focus," prompted Winnie. "We know what we want."

"Precisely." The woman's face lit up. "Say what you will about the merits of the annual prom kill, it does tend to distract the teenage mind from the task of learning. But get beyond that, venture out into the world for a spell, and well by golly, experience gives a correspondent a much clearer perspective on life—not to mention the legal exemption for returning students."

He chuckled. "No slasher."

"Not for you two."

"We'd submit to it if we had to," he assured.

Miss Brindisi moved in to confide, her right breast against Bray's sleeve: "It's for the young." Her smile overwhelmed. "They need it."

Bray nodded. "I understand."

"It's good for them. It toughens the fiber. And it's one hell of a tonic for us post-teens as well, to witness it."

"Yes." His lip corners felt as if they would crack. The woman's lobes looked delectable. "I'm sure it is."

"Well," she said, almost as if they'd shared a dance. "Brayton, Raven, I'll leave you to it. Stop by and say hello, after all the excitement dies down."

"We will," said Winnie.

"Several of your teachers are here tonight, and I know they'd love to meet you."

Bray waved. "We'll be around."

"Enjoy yourselves." She eased off. "And eat up!"

A whirl and she was away, heading back toward the tall man.

"Lion of God be praised," muttered Bray.

"Amen," said Winnie, turning her smile to him.

"Let's hope the *real* Bray and Raven aren't here."

"Are you kidding? Coffinville's at the southern end of the state. I've seen maybe four other older couples. A school this size probably has, oh, I'd guess thirty or forty grads-by-mail each year. They rarely show up on prom night."

"Only the vultures," he said. "The ghouls."

"Yeah, the ones I've seen seem pretty seedy. I say we avoid 'em. There's more virtue in the prom-jumping coward and his societally challenged date than in any hundred of those folks."

"We'll open their eyes," said Bray, scanning for them.

"Damned straight we will."

"Or die trying."

"Will you quit harping on death? Nobody's gonna die. Not tonight and maybe at no other prom ever again."

The layout of the gym was different than it had been at Bray's school. Bigger too. But the hard knot that was high school had tied itself tight in his stomach.

The feeling was the same.

Stifled growls of pent-up fury.

Naked fear.

"We'll see," he said and endured her seethed volley, comforted—even as she had her verbal way with him—at having Winnie by his side.

The fear was delicious.

Thick as oil paint gobbled on with a palette knife.

It rose out of the kids Jonquil passed on the dance floor. It fell in waves from the bleachers, rich and blunt and thrilling beside the music's brassy panic. Claude, captivated by the wicked red ogre towering at the center of the gym, had moved not at all.

"And the purveyor of lesser vices," she said, "having made the mistake of calling the Ice Ghoul dull, found that he could no longer tear his eyes away, forever ensnared in its charms."

Claude smiled at her. "Oh, hello. So who were they, the correspondents who have somehow managed not to look as unsavory as they've got, most certainly, to be?"

Jonquil touched his arm. "Our secret, okay? I don't have the slightest idea. The young man's name is Brayton, I'm fairly sure. The woman went along with my offer of Raven, so you can call her that if the need arises."

"Crashers," he said, bored. "Passes real?"

"Pretty convincing if not. Elwood would've caught an obvious fake at the door."

Claude gestured upward. "You know, in the right mood, and with a certain sinister fall of shadows across its body, this monstrous mound of kitsch has an undeniably creepy allure."

Moisture continued to drip down the sides of the Ice Ghoul's head.

"Does it stack up against the one in seventy-six?"

"This one easily outstrips the other," he said. "It's bigger. More height, more bulk, more menace. I get the uncanny feeling that it's aware of the outrage perpetrated against Futzy. Speaking of which, where is our illustrious leader hiding himself? Doesn't he realize we're all starting to extend the gossip about him?"

Mister Weight-of-the-World Principal.

Old Futzy would be in his element tonight, the focus of punishment, wallowing in misery. A fitting climax to weeks of increased student floggings, his admission of impotence after the prom committee announced the Ice Ghoul as its centerpiece at the dance.

"In his office is my guess. He'll slip in under low lights, keep himself apart from the kids, maybe even from us, until the ceremonies."

"A prom he'll never forget," said Claude.

"Yes. Expect new bylaws next year. No more Ice Ghoul at the prom as long as he's in charge."

Claude nodded. "The one in seventy-six was appalling, but only after Futzy's daughter and her date lay dead before it. The teacher who slashed them worked out a transfer. He'd really gone to town that night."

Jonquil thought back. "Let's see. I was all of fifteen then. My prom took place two years after that in seventy-eight." Someone, after the bodies had been retrieved, had arranged Quill and Dane arm-in-arm, their staved heads angled together, against the hard concavity of a black angel's sorrowing embrace. The deaths of her dearest friends had given Jonquil a backbone of steel.

"So are we going to blow the whistle on these two?"

"Let's not," she said.

"By which I take it, the left lobe of one or both of our crashers—the genitalia as well?—are at risk of being loved, for lack of a better word, by a certain sexy, horny instructress of my near acquaintance."

"Cruel, cutting, and unkind," she demurred, "and quite possibly true."

"I minored in the study of Jonquils."

"Who knows? The night's young. Survivors grow unusually festive at these things, and the spirit's infectious. Let me observe them, maybe have a little fun with them. We've seen really ugly souls buy prom passes from correspondents in the past. There's nothing new about that."

"It provides an additional pinch of terror."

"Which is all to the good," she said. "Let 'em hover at the periphery, add atmosphere, then throw 'em out after the fluttering's done and the padlocks have come off. But what *is* new is this: These two don't strike me as your typical bogus grads-by-mail. There's something different about them."

"A new mix of body parts, Jonquil dear?"

"Never discount it, Claude. People don't couple enough in my opinion—which is the *right* opinion. They don't inflict enough violence. And when they do, there's no creativity, no spirit of inventiveness to it."

"My wives yammer on the same way, at least about indulging in the crude fluidities of sex," he said. "Your take on cruelty is, I hasten to admit, entirely your own—and a vast part of what draws me to you as a friend. That and your lobes of course."

"Kidder." She knuckled his shoulder, enough to make him wince. "But beyond that, they're out for something, and I can't tell what. They seem wholesome and apart, somehow. Here in body, yes, but headwise elsewhere. I'm determined to tease out their little secret before the night is over."

"May the Ice Ghoul watch over you," he said, patting the rough red rump of the beast.

"And you, Claude."

"More cheese!" he demanded, heading off into the music toward the chaperones' corner, swirling up wisps of dry-ice fog as he went, not bothering to see if she followed.

Futzy Buttweiler sat alone in his spacious office, an ache of loneliness echoing inside him with each muffled thump of the bass drum. Below him lay the gym and its vague layers of sculpted sound. As he stared through muted darkness, Futzy fingered the cache of confiscation strewn across his desk.

A bolas from one ferret-eyed defier whose spine had nearly cracked beneath the payback of its stones.

Cattle prods, thumbscrews, portable planers and sanders, the paraphernalia of torture lifted from the parental bedroom.

Pornocrap that would have raised Jonquil Brindisi's ire, so inept were its staged bloodlettings, so low and lackadaisical its standards for cruelty. These sorry tapes dulled a wondrous world of hurt into the turn of a fast buck.

Futzy had left the lights off.

Parallel slats of moonglow fell in cream slants across the carpet before his desk. Welts of moonlight that recalled to mind the flaying he had endured beneath his wives' fury, lacking only the wounds and the cutting words.

But inside his head, words came, redirected words as he redirected daily the abuse he got at home.

A victim there, a victimizer here.

They were all scum, thought Futzy. School culture artificially divided the student body into good kids and bad kids. A false divide. He saw that now.

It hadn't all been flogging and flaying, his exercise of discipline here.

Yet not one student, not one beneficiary of his many kindnesses, had objected to an affront so egregious and humiliating as the Ice Ghoul's return to Corundum High's senior prom.

Futzy forced himself to his feet.

His anger at them was greater than he had thought possible.

The walk to the barred window seemed beyond bearing, so wild and dense with passion the night made the air. Ordinarily, daylight contained his savagery in this office, giving it sanction and a blessing.

But tonight, lunacy edged everything.

Below, in the parking lot, vehicles gleamed.

This was his last chance at them.

He imagined the little shits revving up after midnight, backing out, tracing light-swept trails across blacktop, moving out into traffic, removing themselves and their pointless lives forever from his grasp.

Ah, but what if night went and morning came, and still the cars stayed?

What if something unspeakable swept through the school and fixed them there forever?

What if no key found its way to any padlock? And the air, this same air, grew still, stale, not moved by convection, by the bustle of bodies, by a riding crop descending, nor by the monotonously multiplied insuck and expulsion of air from young lungs?

Conceivable.

More than conceivable.

Matthew Megrin, Tweed's dad, found himself unsettled in the extreme tonight.

His bath seemed to last forever. Yet every check of the sweep-second-hand clock propped on the sink counter surprised him. Surely he had been idling here a good year, contemplating the polderesque rise and fall of his belly from the surrounding water.

Come-ons for *Notorious*, a week of teasers, had replayed in his mind. Endless views of the condemned duo mingled somehow with memories of his first wives, Cam and Arly, as they had been before they had drowned. Their fluxidermed corpses, the stuffed shells-of-themselves which duly graced his vestibule, came nowhere near those memories.

This parade of souls occasionally parted to allow him glimpses of his history class—folds of batter endlessly turned, the same damned desks, students seated according to chart, slated to pass through this year-end terror he so despised and tonight *feared* with a fear that had no limit.

Above all, his daughter Tweed recurred in his thoughts a thousand times. Again and again, her parting smile and "Good night" blessed his inner vision.

She would be killed. Jenna would comfort him in his grief. Then, next year, they would kill *her* and he'd go out of his mind.

Why hadn't he thrown himself wholeheartedly into the anti-slasher cause? He could have contributed more, done with less, "come out" as Krantor Berryman had done two years before, shared the spite and scorn with him, yes, but perhaps set more protests snowballing.

Too late now.

Too late for Tweed anyway.

He got out of the bathtub, vowing something decisive come Monday, some way to keep Jenna from having to run the gauntlet next year.

A milling hallway of seniors whipped up in his mind, dressed in tux and gown finery, massed in a forward hurtling plane. Ahead lay a brick wall, but only one of the bricks was real: one couple creamed, the rest bursting through illusions of brick, thinking afterward that maybe it hadn't been so bad, that it was something all kids ought to go through.

Jesus, his mind was snapping.

Matthew bent to peer into an unsteamed wedge of mirror. His calm eyes amazed him, not a hint of agitation.

He cupped his earlobes, then gripped them tight. Nothing sexual. Not yet. He remembered his childhood years, the comfort that surrounded and enclosed them. All of it a mad delusion that firm ground and not the thinnest of high wires lay between the wobbled balance-and-step of life, and certain death below.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and went out into the hallway. Entering his bedroom, he closed the door after him, feeling more cocoon-like that way. That was the way his parents had watched the show, and it was the way, shut off from their daughters, that Matthew and his wives had watched it.

Thank God for *Notorious*, he thought, realizing the addictive purpose it served even as he craved the hit.

Thank God there were folks rotten enough to fry in public each year, not just for the sexual thrill it provided—considerable, certainly—but also to divert the minds of anxious moms and dads across the nation.

Removing the towel, Matthew strapped on his Private Flogger, molded like a slug to his back, and turned it to Warmup. It sensed the contours of his muscles and their firmness, reminding him of heating pads applied to stiff necks as a boy.

Grabbing a Futterware container of coconut-oil on his nightstand, he made a nest out of his pillows and zapped on the TV.

National coverage of prom night. An East Coast map smattered with sporadic dots of early returns. At this point, the commentary consisted mainly of glib history and idle chatter.

Another station, a local Topeka business channel, scream-gabbed a pitch to survivors, showing a slashed red X simultaneously crossing out a cartoon picnicker and a box on an org-chart, urging its viewers to Call This Number Now!

Then Matthew found the channel he wanted.

Boggs Fleester, hair gray and combed back in perfect coif, sprang into his bedroom not two feet from the foot of the bed.

"Over my shoulder," he said in measured tones, "you can see the electric chair in which our two reprobates will fry."

Fleester wasn't really in the execution room. You could tell that. Soon, the distinguished newsman would fade. The electric chair and its surround would surge out of a flat background into vivid holographic prominence.

As Fleester's voice jauntily recounted the couples' rampage upon a Rhode Island school bus of elementary kids, Matthew glared feverishly at the clock. Come on, he thought. Stuck at twenty-five past eight. Get the damned show on the road.

Tweed, a vision in pink chiffon, beamed at the front door. "Good night."

She was dancing now, fearful at Corundum High, slow and close and clinging to Dex, or giving and getting blows in a frenzied bout of slap'n'smack prior to dispersal twenty minutes away, the slash achieved by nine.

She might, his pride and joy might . . . no, shut it out.

Fleester wrapped up and faded. The music took on intensity. The grim cell moved forward, the chair growing greater both wide and tall, like the Christmas tree in *The Nutcracker*.

Off to the left, an inset bubble hovered, inside it the executioner beside her dials and the two men chosen to pleasure her, naked except for the obligatory lobebags the FCC and common decency insisted upon.

Matthew sobbed.

A cell door opened on the right. In were marched the twosome, stripped, passive, doped up, and resigned.

Gritting his teeth, Matthew turned his Flogger to Low. The first lash fell with a pain that stung and diverted. He oiled his bare left lobe and his gens until the flesh flushed and stiffened. To the suggestiveness of the music he surrendered himself.

The aroma coming from the TV had a sufficient dankness about it to be convincing.

A sizzle of fire flared across Matthew's right shoulder, Cam's favorite place to flog him.

His darling wife Cam had birthed Tweed into the world, then Jenna, and loved them both dearly. Now she was gone, Arly with her, in that awful accident.

Soon *Tweed* would . . . no!

Matthew's hand fumbled as he notched it up, wincing at the increase in depth and frequency.

The couple were strapped in, the woman belted upside down, mouth to groin, groin to mouth. The executioner, her nipples hidden by two rotating male scalps, began to play with the dials.

They writhed as Matthew focused desperately on his own arousal. Uncensored black and white projections danced over their skin.

Funny, how the image of naked lovelobes posed no problem if they were grainy and contorted on curves of flesh. Yet the *couple's* lobes were crudely bagged. And the executioner's, bared now for action, had been expertly cubed out.

The condemned couple—scum bitch and bastard, by any measure—might in other circumstances have enjoyed the pain. But it was one thing to choose to have a lover inflict torment in measured doses within established limits. It was quite another to endure punishment, that would only worsen unto death, from that grim-faced invasive third called The State.

Matthew's arousal was progressing well. A lovely commonality of pull and tug, complementary and compelling, had arisen between his hands.

But the executioner's tinny voice, catching rhythm from another realm, threw a grit of grain into the turning cogs. Tweed at the door. "Good night." A vision in pink, her smile. Dex too so full of promise, his hands thrust to the cuffs into his tux pockets.

The execution on TV was suddenly nothing but sound and fury. Matthew, his penis emblooded and his lobemeat throbbing beneath his ear, stabbed Mute and paused the flogger.

Hugging eight forty-five. He should have turned the damned clock to the wall!

Fifteen minutes to Tweed's phone call if she had been spared. She would make her way back from her assigned spot, passing pay phones, banks of them throughout the building.

He had given her plenty of quarters. More than she needed. He was surprised Tweed hadn't jingled as she left the house.

Matthew rose from the bed. He paced, still erect below, his stiffness a bother. He circled the projection. With the sound off, it seemed unreal.

How could people act the way these two had?

So many children so remorselessly used.

A sheen of floor dirt coated the wrinkles of the woman's soles where her feet hung, knee-bent, above the man's shoulders. He was gripping the arms of the chair, his penis limp upon her cheek.

They had died an hour ago of course. Maybe more. East Coasters were already sated on this couple's prolonged miseries. West Coasters were still awaiting the arrival of dates.

Even the executioner, in her holographic bubble writhing under eager tongues, was in reality on her way home. Maybe she was even concerned with her kid brother's welfare that night at school.

Eight fifty.

This was unbearable.

Year after year, he had taught the prom kill in his sophomore history class as though it were nothing, accepted practice, forgetting the agony he himself had gone through at eighteen.

But it had torqued him, way back then.

It had turned him moody and morose as he turned fifteen. More adult, his folks had said. Until in college, junior year, he had lightened up, discovered song buried in the depths of his wounded heart, and let joy burst from his mouth.

Now, heaven help him, he had delivered his daughter into that same maw.

Even now, she might be . . .

He cut off the thought, a wash of fever at his brow.

Ten more minutes. Give it ten.

She would call. It would be okay. He could breathe easier then.

He thumbed the Flogger, nearly losing his balance as a laser lash seared across his back.

Settling once more into his nest on the bed, Matthew punched up the sound and dug his eyes deep into the couple with the images crawling across their skin.

His flesh and hers hissed beneath a languid electrocution. But that was damned fucking okay with Matthew, they were such slimy shits and good only at the end of their lives (the woman's urine now caught the man full in the face, blinking to avert it) for keeping legions of distraught moms and dads from going insane.

Matthew's fingers scooped up fresh dollops of coconut oil and slathered them on. His penile and lobate tissue responded anew.

Upon the woman's inverted back, a helmeted slitted dome of flesh eased past the thin lips of a blush-lobed lady. Across the man's hairy thigh, twitching beneath a surge, somebody's hand worked a digitally enhanced earlobe deep inside a gaping vagina.

Matthew regained the rhythm.

It lived in the pounding of the music, in the agony of voices, in the faint aroma of roast pork that seeped out of his system (a prelude to the char to come), and in the interwoven throbs of incessantly moving flesh.

He caught that rhythm. He rode it, honed by years of viewing, years of coaxing himself, and being coaxed so by caring lovers, toward the twin consummation of lobe and lingam.

On his way.



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