

9. By the Book

Tweed's chops were just about blown.

The dance band's frantic swing through non-stop charts—heavy on the 'bones and light on the rests—had been more grueling this year than last.

Even the slow numbers felt manic.

Bongo by her side, grabbing at catch-breaths, had been his typical goofball self.

But Dex, Dol, Estlin, and a half-dozen other seniors had acted like square pegs in round holes, hurtling along familiar routes of sound toward two unlucky classmates' moment of truth.

Tweed had been relieved to see Mr. Versailles filling in as chaperone. It meant he wasn't this year's slasher.

But the bristling boxes of riding crops that appeared beside the stage made Tweed shudder, not because she hadn't delivered and received their bare-backed pleasures a time or two in her young life. No, but because when they were dispersed, it would mean that Principal Buttweiler's opening remarks were done and that the moment had arrived to go where the envelope directed, waiting there and cowering.

"The prunes are hot for blood," Bongo cupped into her right ear as she counted.

Glancing into chaperone corner, Tweed saw Mr. and Mrs. Borgstrom edged now on their chairs, in their seventies and shriveled, the adoptive mom and pop of a junior boy whose hair was black and whose ways were sullen and sulky. Their jaws had notches, discolored jags that marked each year they had been married, a practice fallen away in the fifties.

Then the count clicked over in her brain and her horn rose to join in the final verse of "Lobe Town Blues," a dirge filled with quirky delights and a chance for each section to show off.

Festus Targer, his cymbal shimmering beneath them, held them back. Festus had it in him, assuming he survived next year's prom, to make it big as a drummer.

Jiminy Jones nodded an okay at the principal, who was chatting, hands in his coat pockets, with Nurse Gaskin among the chaperones. Mr. Jones' pudgy fingers brought the band to a skillful close, his satisfied smile's peculiar clash with her fears reminding Tweed how remote his age made him from the coming sacrifice.

The applause seemed heartfelt. Jiminy bowed, waved a section at a time to its feet, then the full ensemble.



Tweed put the trombone, sectioned, back into its case. She wondered who would next reassemble it. Herself? Or its inheritor?

Dex's hand held the envelope. His features were strained.

Damn the rules, she thought. It was insane—her dad more right than she had given him credit for—that people as whole and good as Dexter Poindexter fell each year under the red blade of the slasher. He had promised her father protection he couldn't possibly deliver, but she vowed that she would fight to save Dex too, if it came to that.

Passivity and paralysis were not her style.

Nor his.

Tweed took Dex's hand.

They shared a nervous embrace.

"Ready?" he asked.

"There's gonna be one dead teacher," said Tweed, "if he even *tries* to hurt you."

Dex smiled. "We'll waste him."

Principal Buttweiler stood off to the left on a floor scattered with shags of sawdust.

His hands were crossed straight-arm below his belt, a slim packet of index cards down-angled in one hand. His nods and smiles were more perfunctory than usual, rotating lights turning his strained face blue, then orange, then a sickly shade of yellow.

The poor man had been dealt a savage blow. But Tweed's sympathy did nothing to dampen the chill she felt as his eyes fell upon her and Dex, deep and unmistakable (or was she just on edge?), the message they shouted: "You two are the ones. Tonight we're going to see you bleed, mourn you, futter you, use the stoppage of your young hearts to remember this night by."

Dex drew her along into the light-shade-light of their horded classmates, come down now, all of them, from the bleachers. They huddled close to the mike where Jiminy Jones had announced each number and where the principal stood, adjusting the mikestand upward.

Nurse Gaskin felt Bix Donner's needy eyes bore into the back of her head. It was hard, wanting to engage this absurd man's spouses in conversation, but knowing that any attempt she made would be interpreted by Bix as encouragement.

When Futzy approached her, Delia had squinted so as to pretend harsh lights were her reason for rotating the axis of their conversation. But in fact it had been to put Mister Pinhead Asshole out of eyeshot.

Now Futzy was knuckling the mike head.

The principal wore his humiliation with dignity. Futzy's lobes reminded her of those of his slain daughter Kitty, Delia's lost heartthrob two decades before.

"Is this on?" he said. "Can everyone hear me?"

The man had class. He didn't even look at them as he asked the question, striking a pose for the ages. They were pieces of shit—he knew it and so did she—and a deserved flush was about to take place. He would flush 'em *all*, as would she, if that were possible.

"It's a momentous night, isn't it, boys and girls?" he began. "In the petting-zoo portion of your time here, we pampered you. While you cut open frogs and pig embryos, we did the same to your brains. We felt along runnels of thought and redirected rivers. And now, poised to leave this slaughterhouse, you, or rather a token couple from those here gathered, shall be sacrificed."

Delia surveyed the faces, mapped memories of a broken arm, prankish debagings, sneers, jeers, the flow of a dispensatory river of pills and liquids, the probings of countless needles beneath baby-smooth and zit-infested skin—all of it recalling to mind what this graduating class meant to her.

She had been their nurse, seen their health impaired, and healed them.

"You and you. And you." He pointed to three seniors close to Delia. "Distribute these riding crops. This is not a new tool, surely, to many of you. It symbolizes the pain I and my staff have taught you to inflict and endure. With care, these crops will last many years. You have found a first love at this school—or, in some cases, the school has had to find one for you, pairing you for an evening—"

An amused ripple moved through the seniors.

"—and soon, the two of you will engage in a search for a third.

"It is customary for your principal to extend his heartfelt wishes at this point, his hopes that you and your love find the threesome you deserve."

Clever man, Kitty's father was. Futzy's tone teetered between making and denying them the wish he had spoken of.

The man's hurt ran deep.

It touched a cold place in Delia.

"Take your time, rummage long and leisurely through the mate-heap roiling before you in the ensuing years. Choose wisely, both in what you do, and in whom you do it with. Most people settle, mindwise, for pretty meager fare. Don't you be one of them."

Yes, she thought, and some never get chosen.

Annoyance and botheration sounded in Delia's ear: "I love this moment."

"What?"

"This *moment*," Bix repeated as she turned. "The fear absolutely sizzles. And the longer their faces are now, the more gleeful they'll be the rest of the evening."

"Hold this for a second?" She handed him her drink, an expectation in her tone, but not in her intent, that she would be right back.

"Sure." He bobbed it but took it.

The fog had begun to thin. The dry ice was nearly evaporated.

"But enough advice from your shortly to be former principal," said Futzy as Delia sauntered coolly away. "Open your envelopes now. No need to use the eraser end of a number two pencil. A finger will do nicely. Go at once to where the pink sheet tells you to be—on pain of death if the detection scanners find you elsewhere—and do not stir from that spot until the ringing of the second bell."

The rapture on the faces of the Borgstroms, as Delia passed them, was an extraordinary sight to behold. Their jaw-notches positively glowed with anticipation.

Peach popped her gum. "Let's go," croaked Cobra, grabbing her wrist.

She jerked about into his tug, reluctant to leave the gym with its orange and blue and green lights, its glints of sequins and spangles. Even the buffed brown of the gym floor struck Peach as beautiful. But delay might mean death, and Cobra's word—*he* thought so, anyway—was law.

In the glow of night light, the hallway was dim and spooky. The click-click of heels and the rustle of pastel dresses beside tuxedo'd boys made everything feel somehow like a movie set, one last masquerade before real life began.

"Where we headed?" she asked.

"Shut it," Cobra snapped.

She did.

He hadn't even shown her the envelope, the one the shop teacher had given them.

Cobra's eyes were a flat gray. That, Peach was convinced, was how he saw the world—if his taste in clothes was any indication.

She had had sex with that weird old guy from Topeka just because she knew Cobra really wanted a coat he kept mentioning, and the fifty-dollar bills the guy peeled off into her hand would buy it.

But when Cobra came back from the store with the coat, it turned out to be the same old lousy leather as always, an uninspired black with three silver studs along the right sleeve. Hardly worth being flogged for. Hardly worth the taste of some grown-up's dick.

A bunch of kids—most of them dorks, though Babs Nealy and Kinny Conner waved at her—hustled up the stairs by the glass doors to the butchery wing.

Cobra hurried her past the stairs, shoving a scrawny hawk-nosed nebbish out of the way. "Move it!" said Cobra, both to the hawk-nosed guy and to her. Peach gave the kid an apologetic look before Cobra yanked her onward.

That was another thing about Cobra: The violence he visited upon her always arose from smolders of hate. Rarely did he give her the kind of whap, poke, or pinch that signaled true love.

Cobra called that pop-song bullshit. She didn't think so.

Peach watched Tweed Megrim and Dexter Poindexter go into the chem lab. Neat kids. A little unformed for her tastes, but sometimes maybe bland was better.

Twin inverted J's of silver gleamed inside, tall thin spigots over sinks. Then Cobra strong-armed her past the labs.

"Did they stick us on the first floor?" she asked. She was afraid Cobra would try to bulldoze through the shoving mass of students on the stairs to their left.

Instead he dragged her, without reply, toward a darkened classroom set in the corner of the next turn. He yanked open the door and pushed her through.

Desks were shoved together in the center of the room in a logjam of fake-wood planes. Along the walls hung posterboard squares with a number scrawled in black felt-tip pen.

A couple of girls, Dixie Rathbone and Bliss somebody, slumped like stuffed scarecrows on the floor beneath the blackboard.

"Here," Cobra said.

Peach saw their number and beneath it a dark arrow directed downward. Pillows had been placed on the floor, thin as a threadbare blanket but gentler on the butt than hard tile.

She settled in. Cobra humphed down by her side. From where they sat, Peach could see Dixie and Bliss. She wondered if *they* were the ones, if they'd be slaughtered without warning, if she and Cobra and the others arrayed around the classroom would witness the sacrifice. She wiggled fingers at them, but they didn't move, almost as if they were dead already.

Commotion outside the door, raucous boy-talk. From the unclaimed numbers on the walls (she had overheard Bowser mention theirs), Peach guessed Bowser McPhee and his date Fido Jenner. A moment later, they walked in.

Peach had always thought Bowser was cute and little-boy brash and funny, a ferocious mismatch for Fido in her opinion. He had picked up a book she dropped once, then blushed and stammered like an idiot when she kissed his right lobe in thanks.

Now he and Fido started along the far wall, looking for their number.

"Over here," Peach yelled to them.

Cobra smacked her for speaking.

"Thanks," Bowser said. He and Fido collapsed ten feet to her left, beneath their sign.

"Hey weenie," Cobra said, "shut the fuck up."

"Come on, Cobra," Bowser replied, clapping a hand on Fido's knee. "Everybody's up against it tonight. Lighten up, okay? It's a free country."

Cobra tensed beside her.

"Listen, doggie boy. Your fuckin' free country's got two things in it: your face and my fist. You say another word, they're gonna fuckin' connect. It's gonna be one bloody mess of zits, skin, and flesh, you dig, scumwipe?"

She could see Bowser retreat inside his skin, though he glared iron pellets at Cobra. That took more guts than most kids had.

Too bad.

Peach knew, but never told anyone, that when it came right down to it, and without of his gang members around, Cobra would fold.

She had seen, alone late at night, the little boy in him. She knew Cobra was one scared coward hiding beneath layers of protective armor.

She also knew that she was just about ready to dump him.

The bell suddenly clanged. It sent a shock through her system.

Same damn bell signaled the end of one class and the beginning of the next. But in this context, it sounded three times as loud.

All talk ceased. A pall fell over the half dozen in-turned duos seated around the room.

Twenty minutes until the next bell, the one that meant find-the-dead-folks.

Those twenty minutes might be choke-thick with silence.

Or the shiv of a scream might slide into their heads from a nearby classroom, a scream both chilling and relieving.

Or the wall they leaned against might give way and a rough hand draw quick steel across their throats.

On the opposite wall, above two dorky girls in scared embrace, a large clock ticked.

Cobra's hand slipped into hers where no one could see and gave it a private squeeze.

His terror met hers.



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