

10. Defying Gravity

Dark delight.

The school understood perfectly.

Through the glass doors that led into its butchery wing waltzed Flann Beckwith and Brandy Crowe, high-toned worshipers of style, the best slap'n'smack dancers Corundum High had ever seen. Flann and Brandy were odds-on favorites for prom king and queen, despite the run Rocky and Sandy had given them.

Whoever assigned stations—many doubted its much touted randomness—had surely wanted to bring Flann and Brandy down a few pegs.

They'd be pegged *down* all right.

All the way down.

Though the hallway grate below the peephole muffled sound, Flann's voice came through loud and clear. "Christ, what a stench! I thought for sure we'd smelled our last carcass at Monday's final."

Brandy flumphed, "Someone's got it in for us."

"It'll seep into your dress. And my tux."

"I hope they've given us blankets in there," Brandy said. "Even a minute'll get pretty cold."

The taps on Flann's spit-polished shoes came to an abrupt halt outside the refrigeration room. "Nothing we can do about it now. But before the night's over, I'm complaining to somebody. After you, hon."

Sickening.

Even here they moved with grace. Brandy twirled out of view, and Flann's taps followed.

In this part of the school, the backways were tight and ill-lit. They stank of old oak, wet and rotting.

Motor hum from the refrigeration room masked sound from back here. But it also turned the couple, the dapper Flann and his redheaded Brandy with the cinnamon heart, into soundless mouths.

Fortunately, the hanging racks of butchered flesh and the ice sculptures provided ample concealment. Moreover, the large panel farthest from the couple's designated spot had taken two drops of lubricant a half hour before.



Minimal slide, open, shut.

A chilled world stole away all warmth.

Man-sized Ice Ghouls waited here. Legions of them, opaque glassy shapes, sleek and muscled save for a fat howling ghoul who terrified by sheer bulk. Each one raised an icicle dagger, but the howling ghoul's was thickest and most menacing.

Out through their massed numbers, cautious in movement, an ice pick rode tight aslant the killer's torso.

Brandy sneezed.

These two had everything. Good looks. An unending stream of sycophants. A smoothness of manner and tone that erased all grief. Unlimited future prospects. Flann's voice rode upon their assured arrogance. "You okay?"

It would be a pleasure to finish them.

"It's nothing." A sniff, a soft blow, one nostril, then the other. "At least we're out of danger."

"Somebody," Flann insisted, "is gonna lose his job."

"It's okay. It's only ten more minutes. No one ever touches a finalist. That's the law."

"They can't *do* this to Flann Beckwith."

"We're fine," said Brandy. "We're all alone. Just us and nobody else. And you look real sexy. Sexy as money."

"Really? You think so?"

Racks of crayola'd pork flesh serried by as the killer threaded through them.

Sides of meat hung near the doomed pair, a protective veil of butchered beef providing one last barrier if only they'd keep jabbering.

"I'll tell you what I think." Her prom dress rustled. The sounds of thick smooching and shared *mmm*'s betrayed what they were up to. Then they abruptly stopped. "Did you hear something?" asked Brandy.

Caught breath, three haunches away.

"Hey, relax," said Flann. "All I hear is my heart. And yours."

"Mmmm, you're warm."

"You too." There was a slight rustle, as of tinsel brushing against a glass ornament.

"Do you think we should?" Yield filled her voice.

"Who's to know?" More rustling and Brandy's vulnerable moan. "I'm going to suck my sweetie's love-lobe."

The killer stepped free of concealment.

Flann was stylishly hunched over, almost a choreographed flamenco pose. Brandy's eyelids were closed, her chin nestled upon his left shoulder as he mouthed her love-lobe. From his right hand hung her silken love-bag, limp as a finger puppet.

A gleam of debutante eyes opening. Flann's embroidered suit-back, a stretched target. The brutal drive of cloaked resentment.

Then came a pin-cushion *zit* of pierced felt, the ice pick's keen tip driving through expensive cloth.

The body accepted puncture and impalement as though they were crude afterthoughts, the sudden flair of the ice pick handle stopping its forward hurtle in a pit of depressed surge.

Flann's head pitched forward as three bodies sandwiched unbalanced against the wall. A shove at his suit helped unflesh the weapon.

Brandy's eyes widened. Her mouth readied a scream.

Her boyfriend flailed about, arms whipping wide and ineffectual. The love-lobe his teeth had abruptly severed hung like a blood-engorged tick from his lips. Staggering like a drunk upended in a slippery room, he fell away, his skull making a loud smack against the white wall.

Screams now, muffled in the insulated room.

Screams wrapped in puffs of breath.

Brandy's left hand rose to her maimed ear, blood gush vining down her frail wrist.

The ice pick lifted once. It pinned the girl's right hand rising to resist, pinned it like a stuck butterfly against her left breast, and filled her heart with steel.

Her eyes held, even as they clouded with death. Healing lay in Brandy's empty gaze. And in Flann's. Those eyes begged to be iced, as had Sheriff Blackburn's.

Behind them through racks of meat waited the fat ghoul, an icicle dagger upraised at the end of his massive arm.

That would do fine.

But time pressed.

Do Queen Brandy first. Then her lover. Come out of the cold, regain warm passageways, again dare the fear of heights.

The next bit of payback would be a challenge and a thrill, courage and sheer strength tested to the limit. But close by awaited love and healing and an end to years of torment.

Through the motor hum and the meat racks, the leaden-footed dancers' shoetops scuffed across the floor.

Gerber Waddell sat in his supply closet, the door closed, a dim lightbulb over his head.

Like a great ape after eating, Gerber settled cross-legged on the floor, scratching his belly through janitorial denim.

Thoughts struggled to pierce his rage.

Something not right was seeping through the school tonight. This weren't your ordinary prom, no way, no how.

He was used to grisly thoughts on prom night.

Young bad flesh in rich clothing.

The anticipated *smack*.

That's how Gerber always heard it in his head when they brought the victims in. *Smack!* An echo from the slash that few if any saw, 'cept for its aftermath, which he had to clean up lest it settle into the walls.

Couldn't have it settling into the walls.

Had to make them pristine again.

Well tonight, he was hearing lots more *smack* in his head, some *shuk* and *oof* too, feeling bad things transpire, almost as if he were right there and they were happening in front of him.

He had a feeling there'd be lots more cleanup than usual. Lots more walls to make pristine.

They didn't pay him overtime neither.

He remembered the hospital geeks.

In particular he remembered good ol' Gary the nose-picking nurse, who must've thought Gerber was some piece of meat that cared not a whit about the niceties of living. Nope, good ol' Gary could just, privileged as you please, snuk a finger up into his nostril right in front of the sliced-up brain guy lying on the bed.

Gerber's head had hurt after the operation. But otherwise, he hadn't felt any different. He wanted to shove an ice pick up Gary's nose, get a bloody booger on its tip, maybe take some of *his* brain out along with it.

His hand went to the utility belt: Axe head. Plastic pouch o' screwdrivers. Empty place.

Gerber looked down.

No ice pick.

He sighed.

Always losing stuff. The Bleaks was always getting on him about that, about stuff being lost around the house.

Missus Bleak always pig-yammered at him out of her lipsticked oinker of a yap, till he'd had enough and cried in front of her like a big baby. But in his head she was taken apart, all that flab torn open so the blubber came spilling out on the rug and he weren't about to clean *that* up. But he might, just *might* mind you, dance on it. Nor would he care a tinker's damn about his boots, nope, he'd just make sure he didn't slip on the grease and bang the back of his head where the surgeons had left the deep dimple.

Did they need him at the prom?

Probably so, but goddamn if he would go where they wanted him to go. Not with all the early unscheduled *shuk* and *oof* in his head, not with all the unruly visions of struggle warring up there.

He didn't want to see nobody.

I better get up, he thought. Head off to the next place. Where was that? His feet would know, as they always sooner or later did.

It was quiet in the supply closet. Quiet and close and difficult to breathe. They oughta make these denim suits with air holes, not make a head janitor sweat.

Maybe they wrung 'em out, he thought. Maybe they grabbed 'em out of Missus Bleak's bathroom clothes hamper. Maybe they fueled Corundum High with his sweat.

Gerber smiled.

Them teachers ain't got *nothin'* on me, he thought. Them shitty students, they pass through this place like a digested meal. Gerber, he repairs the walls and linings, frees up blockages, keeps the little shits moving through until they blat out the low-slung buttock end o' things.

But there be rumblings in these walls more than usual. They angered him, and frightened him.

Never you mind that.

Nope, I won't.

He got up, swirling with his palms on the concrete floor and shoving off, then letting his feet figure out where to take him next.

Kyla Gorg looked askance at her lover. "Hey come on, Patrice. The drawing's *random*. Even if it wasn't, and really some muckety-muck picks who's to be killed and where, they wouldn't be stupid enough to use the same location two years running."

"Yeah maybe," said Patrice, worrying a thin layer of chiffon between her pudgy fingers. "But there's always a first time."

"We're safe as a snug bug in a rug here. So chill out, okay?" Kyla thought her date was such a chickenshit.

Generations had survived prom night.

They could too.

"It's so *creepy*." Patrice was scandalized. "I can't believe they'd seat us here. Ugh, you can almost smell the blood."

"Oh, stop it!"

Kyla surveyed the dim cold kitchen, a rare look at a place ordinarily out of bounds.

Two other couples were tucked like ungainly dolls amidst sink units and stoves and preparation tables, murmuring in a darkness lit only by one feeble fixture above the cash register.

The white sign that bore their number had seemed to float on the wall when she and Patrice came to it. In this precise spot, the year before, Melody Jinx and her date had waited and bled and died.

Surely the area had been scrubbed down. But the wall paint was ugly green anyway and what Kyla had touched felt, well, greasy.

Tell herself a million times it was only her imagination, she could still see blotches of gore all around them. Melody's ghost, seeping through the walls and floor where Melody had eaten a cleaver, seemed to wrap them in cold mist.

Again Patrice's worry-wart voice: "I wonder where he is."

"Fido?"

"Of course Fido. Who else?"

"Fido's never going to be ours," Kyla said, with what seemed to her like grown-up resignation. "We have to face it, now that we're graduating."

"Don't say that!"

"Come on, Patrice. Folks expect us to triple up with an overweight man, just like on *Fat and Fed Up*."

"Ugh, I hate that show. And I hate overweight men."

"You like *me*, don't you?" Kyla asked.

"Sure I do." A ghostly jellyfished hand came down on Kyla's knee and orange-juiced there its assurance. "But thin old, wiry old Fido is who I want. He's nice and cuddlable and cute and sweet and kind and scrumptious."

"And out of reach."

"We don't know that. Not for sure. And the night is far from over."

Kyla said nothing.

What was the use?

Give Patrice a last try at her dream, the one she'd first dared to voice in tenth grade.

It had been fun to moon over Fido in private, a secret passion they used to fuel their lovemaking. Kyla had often pictured him with them as her lover's whip cut across his quivering flesh. Once—amazing experience—they had closed their eyes, stroking and sucking at one another, imagining it was him: Fido Jenner, split, blimped, making it with himself.

"I'll bet Ms. Foddereau's the slasher," said Patrice.

Kyla pictured the teacher's flat seamless face. Echoes of her dry humor. The old crone stood before a butcher block, working her bloody hands into an open pork belly.

"I'll bet it *is*," said Kyla.

That sly smile, that seemingly offhand remark about fat, the ripple of a chuckle it had set off in class the year before.

Kyla warmed to the idea. "Boy, if it is, I'd love to see her try to surprise us. I'd love to overpower the superior little bitch and wrench her chin up while you sever her trachea, slicing deep to the spine with that bone saw up there." Among knives on the opposite wall, the bone saw gleamed.

"Yeah, bring her on!"

"We'll filet the smile right off her friggin' face," Kyla said.

"Butcher, cleave thyself."

The grimness silenced her, cutting short her glee. A teacher, probably right this moment, was ending two of her classmates' lives.

Not many friends amongst them, but they were okay kids. The prospect of beholding a slain couple sobered Kyla, even as it touched some atavistic nub of delight inside her.

"Patrice?"

"Yeah?"

"It's freezing in here. Hold my hand?"

"It feels real weird, mister, escaping this way. Almost like you're betraying your friends or something."

Zinc, the smallish second trumpeter, spoke to Bray in the dim obscurity of the girls' gym, half-hearted hallspill providing the only light.

Winnie stood far off, waving her hands and flapping her lips to convince a cluster of young girls about God-knows-what.

"It's nothing you could have prevented," said Bray in an attempt to comfort the kid.

Zinc shook his head, eighteen looking fifteen, his height a paltry five feet. "Doesn't matter. That Russian guy, the scientist with the bushy eyebrows, you know who I mean . . . he says people

can control their fate, that there's a psychic link between your deepest desires and what actually happens to you."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"That's what *he* says."

"People say all sorts of wrongheaded things."

The other trumpeter, the defiant-looking one, was resting his elbows on the trampoline pads in the center of the gym. His knuckles thudded an off-rhythm against the thick springs.

He had been clipped and curt when, on their way here, Winnie had offered a compliment on his playing. Now his restless drumming stopped and he strode over to them.

"Hey, Zinc," he said, "let's try it out."

"You don't mean jumping on the tramp?" The kid was incredulous.

Sarcastic: "No, I mean lobesucking. Come on, it'll be a blast." The taller boy, a lick of hair sickled over his forehead, pointedly ignored Bray. *Grown-up, over-the-hill has-been*, Bray could almost hear him thinking.

"Don't, Butch. You'll break your neck."

"Well, jeez, at least spot me. Come on, man. Sailing on up into the darkness? It'll get your juices flowing."

Balancing on one foot, he wrenched a shoe off and tossed it down *thock fwap-fwap-fwap*.

Its mate quickly followed.

"Is he always like this?" asked Bray.

"Only when something's eating him. The prom, you know. Going away to school next year."

The charcoal blur hoisted himself up onto the edge of the trampoline, then hop-rolled onto its yield of canvas.

"Let's spot him."

They skated across the smooth gym floor, a sensation like a layer of ice beneath the soles of their shoes. Other kids were coming in from all directions, and Winnie, turning her head, joined him.

"Couple o' converts?" Bray asked about the girls she had been talking to.

"Discontent is everywhere," said Winnie, "a micron or two beneath the skin. What's with your musician friend?"

The trumpeter had found the discolored center of the canvas. He staggered at first, then eased into a gentle bounce.

"Who knows? Maybe he wants to die."

"Hey, you guys," Butch shouted on the uplift. "It's all a crock. (*Sproing!*) This prom crap. (*Sproing!*) You and me, we can (*Sproing!*) stop it, and we ought to."

Worked up already to nearly ten-fifteen feet, change falling out of his pockets and spinning on the canvas below, Butch stiffed up suddenly, knees bearing the brunt, arms shot out to the sides for balance. He bent and swept the coins off, metal clatters as they waterfalled through the springs, pinging and rolling across the floor.

"Zinc, come on, man," he said.

Then Zinc monkeyed up.

Bray steadied Zinc on the pads, and Butch helped him over the crisscross of springs. His shoes whip-rolled toward Bray, then fell floorward in twin thuds. "I can't believe I'm doing this." Standing, he linked hands with his lover and began a slow seesaw. "Woe, woe, woe!" he said, one at each bounce.

Bray glanced at Winnie. She looked sharp-eyed and stunning, a heartmelt.

"Kids," she commented in awe and disgust.

The seesaw diminished to nothing. The boys bounced now in synch and rising, white cuffs and clasped hands, their moonish faces alight with thrill, their arms angling out on the downfall, then snapping down flat like collapsed umbrella struts as they shot skyward once more.

A drifting horde of seniors, some of them tender, others not, rectangled all about, shouting encouragement and holding their hands up to offer instant rebuff against a bad fall.

Butch and Zinc were ill-lit as they pizza-doughed the canvas and it rebounded them upward. But on the rise, they slipped into even greater obscurity, a sleeve of blackness enveloping them, then releasing them on the downfall.

There was no ceiling visible. Just the one Bray sensed up there, climbing ropes strung up way high like dreams of vines, no limits to how daring the trumpeters might get.

Vanish.

Re-emerge swiftly downward, a plunge through squid ink into the dim ocean below.

Then arrow upward again, squeals of delight rocketing from their mouths.

Bray fancied he heard a noise up above, a metal strut adjusting to chill or weight.

Down again they shot, but Bray kept his eyes above, a dark shift in blackness he assumed he had to be imagining.

Up they rose.

But suddenly there oofed, above, an expulsion of breath, a blow to the belly, and one boy came down empty-handed, a look of terror smeared across his face.

It was the monkey-looking kid, too distraught to keep himself from an upward bounce as lofty as the previous one. Then he too, with a high choking sound, stuck up there.

Swift whickers of pain fell from above. More mechanical sounds, black on black, loud creaks, a spider dandling its web about trapped flies.

Someone asked stupidly, "Where are they?"

"Get the lights," Winnie called weakly, and it seemed to Bray that she thought she had shouted it.

Yes, I'll do that, he thought. I'll get the lights.

But all Bray could do was stare up into the blackness and listen to the bold shifting sounds, the creaking obscenity of movement and stretched rope, the shifts of some murderous shape about its work.

"They can't *do* that," a girl said. "He's a *tender*."

Others took up her word, the unfairness of it all and the shock in their voices.

In front of him, the trampoline canvas popped like a bedsheet snapped in a breeze.

Then again.

A wash of pops rained down, a sudden shower, foul-smelling.

Bray caught on his chest a slap of liquid, a spray against his face. And a second inundation fell from above as kids backed away.

Bray felt Winnie melt against him. "Jesus, Bray," an echo of her lost strength, "what's our guy doing?"

Above, there sounded a clattering as though a handful of drumsticks were being badly negotiated.

Then something fell, shattering: an icicle, its fragments skating across the darkened canvas, smashing hard, and skidding across the floor.



[Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported](#)

You are free:



to Share - to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:



Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).



Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.



No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.
- Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.