

PART THREE. The Game Changes

"The future smells of blood and leather, of godlessness and incessant whipping. Our grandchildren would be well advised to come into the world with extremely thick skin on their backs."

—Heinrich Heine

"When you skin your customers, it's a good idea to leave a little skin behind to regenerate, so you can skin them again."

—Nikita Khrushchev



12. Zipped Lips and the True Meaning of Fear

Condor had been flying on whatever beautiful shit he had swallowed in the car.

He'd been letting the dance music unfold new eternities inside him. Earing the fear, eying the terror that flaked skin from familiar faces, as old mush-jowled Futzy dispersed 'em all, skelter and yon.

He felt heaven come stairstepping closer as they *shuk-shuk-shuked* upward and the handrail, with its hacked worn inked germ-infested splendor, gave them guidance toward a way-the-fuck-up-there staggeringly simplistically functional classroom where once, two years before, Mr. Fink had tossed chalk bits like an outfielder zinging third base to get some kid's attention.

Blayne, darkly brooding all night, had grown darker still, muttering bunches of creepy shit as they sat there alone under the chalkboard behind Mr. Fink's desk.

They had named each possible teacher, looking for a slasher. Their yammering faces oozed out of floor tiles or from the shadows beneath the desk, or they fell from the chalk tray overhead.

Zane Fronemeyer, conjured by an unrelievedly morbid commentary from Blayne, had misted up from a fallen eraser, an oblong devilcake dusted with snow, to menace them with a paintbox of horrors.

Condor had convinced him.

It was Fronemeyer.

Their wacko art teacher!

Then the bell clamored like a floodlight all ablaze. No light shone, yet *all* was light.

Brilliantly limned with light ineffable was this place of salvation. An industrial strength vacuum cleaner of light. A beam of elation. A cockjacking, lobesucking epiphany of hot white jangling lumens.

"We made it!" exclaimed Condor, the drugs surging high in him.

"Yep and it was tough to make," said Blayne. Beneath his continuing brood, an imp peered out from those wide amazing eyes.

"We're *continually* making it, aren't we?"

"The windows, the wastebasket. It's a dull make." Blayne's face turned nasty and smug. "But there's a more interesting make waiting for us out there."

The girls.

"Yeah!" said Condor.

Blayne had lipped Altoona.

Or so he had said in the car.

All night, Condor's radiant head had wagged between death-dread and the black-laced duo they had avoided talking to, relying instead on odd across-gym anticipatory stares and bizarre but weirdly neat circlings, so close they could touch but pretending to ignore one another instead—all of it a buildup to survival and the costume shop.

"I am one primed monkey!" said Condor.

"One prime *mate!*" Blayne corrected.

"Ugh. Squirrely, real squirrely." Balls of ticked fur opened up and skittered across the room.

"Squarely so."

"Double ugh, " said Condor. "Let's go get 'em."

He got to his feet and gave one last look at the last place of instruction he'd ever have to be in. The classroom was a fist relaxed into an open palm, reluctant to release him but not all that unfriendly, despite the years of mind-wounds it had inflicted.

In the corridor, puffs and creases of student body flurried by, relieved, hunting, hunting.

Fuck the hunt. *They* were off to snag some *live* game.

A flutter of wings brushed against his face, as two chiffoned quail went birding by: Contusa and Calibrianna, caught up in an unending web of in-turned chatterboxing.

Down the stairs, down the stairs, down the stairs.

A mewling slight spewed like a spitwad from Capper McGee's twist of a mouth as he bounded past them up the stairs. They gave one another fuck-the-silly-bastard looks and wiped McGee's hurl off like so much fartwind.

Condor loved the building's dark dead funk at this time of night.

The place was dying. It was yielding them up. And in the bowels of this bowel of a fuckin' school, behind the scenes, some blood-splashed teacher was right now crimsoning a sink.

As they hit the first floor and headed left toward the auditorium, Condor stopped.

"Hey, watch it!" Blayne bumped him. "What? A glass wall? What?"

"I just had a terrible thought." Condor saw the girls splayed wide, huge fingers punched deep into their bodies, prying then open like so many crabshells. "What if he got *them?*"

"Leapin' Christ, Condor," said Blayne. "Then they'd be dead, we'd be ess-oh-ell, and I'd be so pissed, I'd toilet-paper the turdsucking slasher's front yard for a whole freaking year. Now keep moving, will ya? They're waiting for us."

Condor moved.

Humiliation clamped about his head.

Damn it, Blayne was deep, Blayne was smart.

Whereas *he* was dumb and pokey. He'd never amount to much. Even Pim and Altoona—a couple o' trash-talkin' gals doomed to lives of dirt, snot-nosed brats, squinty-eyed crooked-lipped drags on ciggies that wrinkled their faces toward cronedom years before their time, and endless ineptly-done housework, as far as he could see—would probably reject him, make him watch, get it on in front of him with his best bud, steal him away, and leave poor Condor forever bereft.

"Oh shit, come on." Blayne hugged him as they moved, a cheer-up look on his flushed crazed swirly face. "Look, I'm zipping up my slagging mouth." He did so with a yank, then unyanked the zipper and brushed a finger along the crenelated niobium lining his lover's lower lip.

"I'm sorry," Condor said, feeling better.

"Pas de pro-blay-mo." Blayne tugged open the door to the backstage area and they went in.

Condor heard yells from the auditorium off right. No bodies found yet, though it sounded as if all the seats were being rocked furiously down-up-down-up in the futile search.

They passed a door marked PROPS on the left. Then BOYS' DRESSING ROOM, GIRLS' DRESSING ROOM, and finally, partly ajar, COSTUME SHOP. Blayne, hand to handle, zagged in, Condor behind.

The ceilings were high, but the place felt cramped and confined for all the crap jammed into it. Box after box serried and rose to their right and left. Scrawled labels vied with brittle typed ones for the truth about the boxes' contents.

Shoes lay heaped like war dead below. But before Condor could spook himself too much with the ghostly limbs akimbo'd bodiless out of them, they turned the corner into another larger room, where rack upon rack of fluff and color greeted them, a crazy salad of cloth, sequins, and odd-buttoned garments.

Blayne picked his way through, a jungle hacker amid old-outfit smells. "Yo!" he said. "Anybody home?"

"This way," trilled an amused voice.

Then Condor followed his date around one last switchback of gray-wheeled racks and faded finery gimcracked together.

There the girls waited.

Altoona and Pimlico, two incredible blips of life grinning and shifting and sexing over by the sewing machines, their legs crossed at the ankles, leaning back everywhere.

Futzy's mind churned like a washing machine agitator. Pumps and clunky polished boy-shoes in vast mooing herds of babble were moving along the hallway outside the gym. As the scum scurried by, Futzy nodded at them.

It had been all he could do, speaking over their heads from the band risers, to control his anguish at the papier-mache creature before him and to keep from blasting the little shits with both barrels of his anger.

Now a few of their number were dead, waiting to be discovered and brought to the gym.

Futzy had thought that once this part of the evening arrived, once the Poindexter kid and his date had been dispatched, he'd be in for smooth sailing.

But his bloodlust was nowhere near sated, and he guessed he had known that all along.

"Hello, Mr. Buttweiler." High fluted voice, Charmina Fuchs bubbling by alone. She would make a couple of young studs an obliging breeder some day.

"Charmina," he muttered, stripping her with his eyes, imagining an impossibly long whiplash sweeping swifter than jag-lightning down the young girl's cream-curved torso, her skin blushing beneath the whip sting's fury.

Adora Phipps, wearing her granny clothes and antiquated lobebag, had been strangely attentive tonight. Weird duck, her hair up and wrapped in a tight bun, one strand astray. After the speech, over chaperone refreshments, she'd made feints toward kindness.

Futzy had kept his replies superficial and moved on.

As he watched flocks of boybuddies quickwalk off toward the labs, swivelbutted and gawk-armed, he wondered what the strange lady English teacher, this Adora, would think of his homelife, his cold wives, the spattered blood on his bedroom walls.

Would it shock her?

Would it turn her off?

Or on?

Kitty, holding back her hair with one hand, bent to a drinking fountain.

A rush to Futzy's brain.

Not his daughter of course, but maddening-without-meaning-to-be Wyn Wynans. She stood up, oblivious to him, licking her lips, and went into the gym with her unworthy date.

A sob escaped Futzy's lips. Luckily no one was by to hear. They had to pay—they'd pay in *spades*—for the Ice Ghoul's return.

He would see to it.

By God, he swore he would.

First, Tweed tried the phone bank near the science rooms by the north exit.

"The phones are hosed," said Tad Verle, headed back to the gym in a pink bowtie that accentuated his outstuck ears.

She tried both phones. Tad was right. No dial tone. Dead air.

"That's weird," she said.

"Your dad'll be okay," replied Dex. "Come on."

"He'll be worried." She could feel fret marks on her brow and a tightening in her belly over delaying Dex's stupid hunt for the slain. "Let's try the ones by the front door."

Dex, saying nothing, trailed after her.

Tweed wished he would grow up.

Principal Buttweiler, pacing the hall like a circus bear restive and unbicycled, looked stunned to see them.

He broke eye contact and edged away.

Tweed chalked it up to his unhinged state of mind—the Ice Ghoul, his rumored sado-mates, all of that.

Four phones were located near the entrance, silver corded and stained. Wood partitions scored with graffiti provided token separation between them.

A gaggle of girls were crowded about the left phone. "Shit on a stick," said a knobby-elbowed girl named Relda Weep, whom Tweed had known since first grade and not spoken to once in all that time.

The girls moved off and Tweed found the same damned dead lines here too.

"This is spooky," she said.

"Wonder what the deal is."

"Dad'll be worried, Dex. He'll climb the walls."

Dex looked concerned. "You're really torqued, aren't you?"

She nodded and bit her lip.

Dex hugged her.

Her fears conjured her father at home, his voice shifting into a soft dithering dirge as he eyed the phone and bullets beaded his brow.

"I'm sorry," said Dex. "I wish I could do something. Hey. What if we found Mr. Waddell?"

"The janitor?"

"Sure. *He* could fix it."

Dex was right. Soft doughy congenial Gerber Waddell, head janitor of the quiet ways and kind smile, would rummage around in his hollowed-out skull and come up with the fix, a found treasure glittering in his brain. She hadn't seen much of him since he had switched on the colored lights. "Where do you think he might—?"

A cheer went up beyond the table where Mr. Dunsmore and Daub Murch had sat, signing seniors in. A back-walking, front-walking band of kids appeared, surrounding and egging on a pair of football jocks who were carrying the corpses of two girls.

Oh lovely, came Tweed's first thought. Female dates, just like twenty years before. Wouldn't *that* non-linearize poor old Mr. Buttweiler!

Then she fixed on the victims, their heads rollicking jerkily in the crooks of elbows.

The one with the O'd mouth and not a drop of blood anywhere was Flense, a math whiz and a quick wit. It chilled Tweed to see the wan, slack-jawed face of a long-time friend approach so.

And lumbering by beside her in a crewcutted jock's arms, her fingers missing from the hand in front and a bib of blood splashed like a riotous poinsettia where her belly should have been, was Pescadera Carbone. Pesky. Flighty, funny, and now lifeless.

"Oh, God," said Dex. "It's so"

"Yeah, no kidding."

Tweed stared at them.

The slow parade rhythmmed by, some of the students sobbing, strange grins lighting other faces, all of them awkwardly taking up the pace no one in particular had established.

Dex and Tweed, latching onto the tail, made their way toward the gym. A great pain lanced through Tweed's gut, a pain inscribed with two names: Pesky and Flense.

But also there, and all about, were bright pings of joy, bubble bursts, sniffs of champagne, and each one said, *Not Lon. Not Jerzy. Not Camilla.* Not this friend or that.

The ping which burst most often, again and again, proclaimed, with sweet relief, *Not Dex!*

"Let's go inside," he said softly.

Tweed hugged him, long and teary, and they did.

"Hi, Blayne," Altoona said. Friendly sarcasm and at-lastness colored her words. "See anything you'd like to try on?"

"Yep," he said. "Two things."

Condor stood next to him, a hair taller and hyped, his lip-zipper aglisten with fresh licked spittle.

Altoona's left hand lightly gripped the rounded edge of a sewing table. Pim's laced fingers stroked her date's knuckles in high elation.

"Hi, Blayne," Pim said. "Hi, Condor."

"Hello," Condor tried. Something in his tone provoked a round of giggling.

The windowless costume shop had its lights up full. Though the place went on for miles, the myriad racks, choked with costumes and huddled about them, made it feel somehow cozy.

Altoona became aware of her heartbeat, a delicious anticipatory lub-dub, lub-dub.

"You guys sure look sharp," her lover said.

She knew the soft-voiced anticipation that seized Pim in the prelims. That's what Altoona heard now.

It gave moisture and swell to her gens.

"And you girls look rounded in all the right places," said Condor.

It sounded stupid, fake-suave.

When Condor cast a look of embarrassment in Blayne's direction, it led to a second volley of laughter, during which Blayne ushered his friend forward.

"You take the stuff?" she asked. It hadn't done much for her, but Pim was pretty loopy.

"Oh yeah," Blayne said. "A killer coaster."

"Setting mostly," she commented. "But now that we're past the slaughter, ain't nothin' but smooth sailing and clear vistas ahead."

Blayne nodded as he came closer, but it was clear he wasn't one bit interested in listening.

He cobra'd Altoona's eyes. His hand found her free hand, their fingers entwining at their sides as he eased in to kiss her.

There was that warmth again, a zillion times warmer. His rough-nubbed lips pebbled across her pillowy ones. It turned Altoona on.

She tongued metal.

Rise, fall, rise, fall of zipper-teeth.

Cabrille's handiwork indeed. Much like the licking she'd given Pim the night before, but oh so different as well.

Condor and Pim were engaged in an awkward embrace, rocking and swaying, their lips blending.

Blayne's mouth slanted across her cheek to her right earlobe, his zipper moving like a moist blunt blade pretending to cut her face.

Friendship lobe indeed!

It was more like another lefty, her sexlobe's twin, when the metal ring of his lips encased her flesh. She gasped upon his cheek when he fingered her left lobe through its lobebag.

First fondle.

She boldly did likewise to him, diddling him through his thin, flexible leather.

The daring of it! If anybody caught them, they'd be expelled. Denied graduation.

Forced to repeat senior year.

Forced to attend next year's prom.

It made what they were doing explosively exciting.

Pim was moaning beside her.

Glancing over, Altoona saw an inept hand fumble at Pim's lobebag, tug on its bowstrings, yank it swiftly off. The sight of the exposed sexlobe jazzed and juiced her.

Pim's head swung right, her heavy-lidded eyes aglow with drugs and desire, as the usually shy Condor slurped eagerly at her engorged lobe.

Blayne wore a tight elastic designer bag, as did Altoona. He was shimmying hers down and she his, his lobe so nice and thick and warm and sexy beneath her fingers.

Blayne eased her head around.

Racks of courtly costumes hung like dead kings and queens crammed together.

The touch of his tongue, the cool slide of zipper teeth, took her breath away. Her quim was dripping, the swollen labia tight about zip-jags of niobium.

As much as she longed to be sucked into lobate ecstasy, she wanted even more to lick Blayne there too at the same time.

Impossible.

She stopped him and whispered the word into his left ear, her chin at his sexlobe as she spoke: "Foursome." She drew back to see his eyes flare with naughtiness and delight.

Then Altoona was both leading and being led, Blayne hovering at her left shoulder, laughing but mostly keeping his lips at her lobe.

She laughed too.

Into the other couple they toppled, a slow sensual collide, her lips finding Condor's sexlobe while he tongued Pim's.

Blayne's muted moan at her lobe, the tiny pain of zipper teeth biting into her arousal, signaled what she sensed: that Pim's hot mouth had moue'd around his engorged lovelobe, their illegal lovesquare at last complete.

Now all was sucking and being sucked.

Hands roved in every direction. Belts were yanked off, skirts raised.

But head play held sway. It was so majorly mindblowingly incredible, moving higher at each tongued urging, passing them on, grokking that Condor was turning Pim on with the same curled spiral of energy.

And she Blayne.

And on back to Altoona.

Pim climaxed first, that sweet tight sexy childlike *unngh* that Altoona so loved, with the upward flip which led so sweetly from one catch breath to another.

Then they all came, an absurd lovely quartet of uninhibited noise.

In the midst of her orgasm, she felt Blayne ease past her panties, stretching the lacy thigh-hole.

He found what he sought.

Zip-teeth.

Her inner labia behind them.

He used her hot quim to wet her nub, gently circling there, his knuckles knocking lightly at embedded metal.

Then she was off again, thrusting, gripping Blayne about the shoulders, wanting him inside her so badly, wanting his lobe on her nipples, on her clit, wanting it all.

Pim would be there to help, or to be set upon in turn.

And Condor too, damn their warped society so insistent on three! He would make four, and four would be just fine. Then she couldn't think anymore, surges of orgasm rotating the tinseled costume room about her like a carousel.

"Hey, I know!" Blayne said. She only half heard him, hugging him, gasping downward, the sturdy table behind her a blessing to her balance.

"What?" said Condor, too loud but that was okay. The poor dear was excited and riding high on some pretty good shit.

Pim toyed with his zipper pull, there where his smile came to an acute angle that pointed to his friendship lobe.

"Take Pim's clothes off, I'll show you." He had already unzipped Altoona. Now he eased the leather skirt down over her ample hips. She did thigh sways to help out, kicking her pumps off on the thread-wisped floor.

Her leather vest hung open.

His hot hands smoothed over her tummy, her spine, went through her private hair and down her butt slit, caught at lace briefs and eased them off and away.

"We gonna dress 'em up?" Condor asked. He was slower in stripping Altoona's girlfriend, but Pim's succulent body finally came full naked into the costume shop's gaudy light.

"No, stupid."

"Aw, come on, guys," said Pim. "Dress us up."

Blayne leaned over and kissed Altoona's lips. He caressed her sexlobe with one hand and pinched a nipple with the other.

She seized up in that hot frenzied way as if someone had dropped an ice cube down the back of her dress. She didn't mind a bit.

Blayne broke the kiss and said, "I have a better idea than playing dress-up. You're gonna like it."

He knelt before Altoona, using her leather skirt to cushion his knees. Angling his neck to the right, he lined up his lips with her labia.

Condor caught on and did likewise with Pim.

It was a gas, watching Condor and Pim fumble their zippers together, even as she and Blayne did the same. It was like being tickled in lots of yummy places while trying to zip two sleeping bags together with greased fingers.

Blayne slid his zipper pull, the one along his lower lip, into the starter at the base of her right labia. Altoona made a try at hers, joining it with his upper lip starter, but he began to tongue her and that threw her off.

"Wait," she said. "If you keep doing that, I'll never get this in."

He held off.

Then she had it.

It didn't catch on any skin along the way, but glided up as his glided down on the right, making an intimate seal between them.

Everything felt fine and warm and good.

Then his tongue resumed, a wet rouse where their lips conjoined, perfect union, his head giving her its ardency as he rhythmized there.

She glanced at Pim, who was getting off in that special way of hers. Pim looked like a soft pink dream without clothing. And her squirms—as Condor, intimately lip-zipped, lapped her—seemed to say, Robe me in all the world's wonders, wash me in sunlight, let perfect ecstasy swallow me up.

Altoona stretched her right hand toward her girlfriend and Pim seized it in that sweet grip.

Life radiated upon her oval face.

This moment felt like a pinnacle of bliss, which surely it was. Yet it was the beginning of something even greater.

Oh, Jesus.

Her kneeling boy-lover, with his lashable back, killer tush, and steely smile, swept her up into a yummy rhythm. Her joy began to rise again. "That," she said to Blayne. "Yes, that."

Pim's right hand was stroking Condor's hair. "Honey, he's so good," she said to Altoona, almost as if her new boyfriend wasn't there, almost as if he were a trained monkey that couldn't understand. "His mouth is so fucking incredi . . . mmmm . . . oh, yeah!"

Altoona winced. She nodded, unable to speak one word as the tremors seized her. Her hips swayed as Blayne's head moved in perfect harmony. Their blent love surged upward.

Then a hand appeared on Pim's head, grasping her hair and yanking back so hard that her neck made a snapping sound. A blade came across the arched skin, opened up a red blurt-and-spill down the curve of her body and a cascade of blood onto Condor's side-turned head.

A face emerged.

It came toward her.

Blayne struggled below, panic in his eye.

The hand came in rough and scrabby at her head, her hair, hanks yanked back, a crude tug that wrenched a neck muscle.

Just as the face registered with her, the name rushing in, a tautness bloomed in her throat, too fast for her hands to avert it, then a hot outgush along her breasts and belly, cooling as it came, and no-breath, nothing, nothingness closed upon her.



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