

## 14. Prom Askewity

Tweed's dad shut off the TV and his Personal Flogger. Wincing from the welts, he shrugged out of the device and wiped his eyes with a tissue.

The same damned dirge rose from his lips, his voice quavering as Tweed's memory persisted.

Smiling.

Standing at the door.

"Good night."

A vision. The sudden flash of her life. She had popped from Cam's womb, growing much too fast toward womanhood.

And now?

The answering machine on his nightstand caught his attention.

A one. Not a zero.

A deep red number one, staring back at him.

Why hadn't he noticed it there on the phone?

How had he missed the ringing?

Before his bath. Toothbrushing as sinkwater furied from the faucet. Humming a foamy *fossil-fossil* mazurka.

Matthew bet—no, he *knew*—that that was when the call had come.

He hit Play.

An unfamiliar woman's voice scoured inside his head, using his daughter's name. She berated him and confirmed his worst fears.

Matthew had to play it twice to get it all, its harsh message of death and possible salvation so unsettled his mind.

There was a tight fear in him and a sobbing.

But there was also anger. At himself, at Corundum High, at the entire warped ritual so ingrained in the culture.



If this unknown caller spoke the truth—and her words carried conviction—Tweed and Dex were either dead or saved. Either way, it was too late to do anything about it.

But his anger grew. It refused all reason, shaping its own reasons, acts that impelled.

Kill the killer.

Leap to the gym lectern and grab the mike.

Shame the entire student body, the faculty, with an impassioned speech that would haunt them the rest of their days, that would force them into battling against the custom's continuation, that would at the very least halt the fluttering of his daughter and her boyfriend.

He would bring them home in one piece. He and the Poindexters would join hands, mourn for the dead, speak from the heart in support of the anti-slasher movement.

Matthew dressed, muttering, singing a song quick and curt and choppy. The sobs that welled up threatened to crush him. But he gritted back his tears and pressed on.

Insane, this pointless flurrying, he thought. Tweed is dead. Stolen from him.

But his fingers vigorously zipped and buttoned, thrusting wallet, keys, coins, and handkerchief into his pants pockets.

He bounded down the stairs.

Stopped on the last one and stared.

By the front door beyond her fluxidermed moms, Tweed at her loveliest looked back.

"Good night."

Matthew's palm arced on the newel post. He headed away from the vestibule, into the back of the house and along a hallway.

"I'll get them." The phrase matched his stride, drums and percussion sounding in the background. "I'll *get* them, I'll *get* them."

Into the laundry room, past washer and dryer, he tore open the door to the garage and hit the button, shoulder-high on his left. The garage door rumbled up.

His eye caught the hatchet on the wall, nails angled to hold it, a worn leather cover sleeved on it like the hood over a hawk's eyes.

He grabbed it. Solid heft. It bounced once on the passenger seat.

Then he fired up the car, intent on getting to Tweed, on saving her or making them pay for her life.

Something. Anything.

It was against the law for anyone but the designated slasher to use the school's backways.

But the law wasn't going to stand in his way. Not tonight. He wouldn't allow it.

Matthew backed out too fast, rotating the wheel. Drumming filled his head. Percussion. A surge of fierce melody. The garage door jiggle-rumbled down in counterpoint. The roadway at the end of his driveway curved and reversed beneath him.

He gave a bitter laugh.

"I'll *get* them," he sang. "I'll *get* them."

Crazed father to the rescue.

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The trumpet wept and wailed like an old man slumped over, smoking a cigarette, eyelids heavy, against a moonlit wall in an alleyway.

Sandy's boyfriend looked dazed, as he often did. Rocky rarely gave himself credit for having any brains. "But I thought," he said, "our third would be some guy *outside* of school."

"I did say that," said Sandy. "But Cobra is different."

Cobra was staring at her breasts, but she could tell his attention was divided. His glance flicked toward Peach Popkin, who was cozying up to two losers. "Hey Rocky, come on," he said. "I've *never* been part of this fuckin' school, and you know it."

Sandy felt exceedingly jazzed, as if her entire being were drenched in lubricant and every move she made, down to the least breath, turned her on even more.

She was used to erectile eyes painting sex patterns on her body. Mostly, that had been a subliminal annoyance. Not until this moment had she herself felt a fraction of the fantasized sensuality at play in those eyes.

The concluding bell had done it.

It sparked something in her. It planted a seed. When she and Rocky burst out of that smelly locker room with the other kids, it felt as though she rode on a wave of freedom.

She was free to be whatever she wanted. No limits. The balloting was done, Rocky would be king, she'd be queen, and no one could coerce her into fulfilling some fantasy of theirs.

Not any more.

They would test-drive, at least, this Cobra. He was different. He was dangerous. It would be fun to jump his bones. Fun too to watch the hood and the jock turn one another on.

She couldn't wait.

"Well, Sandy knows best," said Rocky.

"Damn fuckin' straight, she does." Cobra's hands did spastic fidgets, a nicotine jag. His eyes slipped up her dress and licked between her thighs.

"But none o' that drug stuff." Rocky sat high on his horse, the one whose saddlehorn Coach Frink had stuck up Rocky's butt.

Cobra looked sharply at him. "Drugs? What are they? I never heard of any dee-are-ugs, not in my whole fuckin' life. You clear on that, muscle man?"

Sandy imagined the whip in his hand. It made her heart race.

"Hey, but I thought you . . . I heard that you—"

"It's all lies, man. Bad rap's done stuck me with a bad *rep* all the goddamn time in this fuckin' shithole. They never get off your back once they climb on. They're like a Flogger stuck on High with the straps sewn shut. But nobody never proved a thing on me, not one."

"Sorry, Cobra," Rocky said, looking cowed. "I didn't mean nothin' by it."

Rocky could have torn Cobra in half without raising a sweat. But Sandy guessed years of bull-headed coaches had made him malleable. She and this dark-eyed mini-thug had years of fun ahead, making Rocky perform for them.

"That's it, guys," she said. "Be friends. We have a whole dance to feel this thing out—"

"—I'm gonna feel *you* out—"

"—and I for one am planning to enjoy it." She could already sense a dark texture to the air, a miasma of thin-lipped disapproval from students and teachers alike, judging the three of them.

It did nothing but turn her on.

The trumpet music stopped. The drummer began a roll, soft, then faster and louder until finally he spangled off a cymbal shining gold and shimmery in the spotlight.

"Fuckin' Futzy's up," muttered Cobra, "ready to spout more prom bullshit."

The principal held folded papers in one hand and tapped the mike with the other. He was gazing out, white in the face, beyond the gathered masses toward the Ice Ghoul.

Mr. Buttweiler, a really nice man who winked at Sandy a lot, looked seriously psycho tonight. Too bad the prom committee, many of them friends of hers, had trampled on his feelings.

But he would get over it. Maybe it would help him overcome his twenty-year-old funk.

And if it didn't?

Well fuck him, she thought, amazed at the crudity of her musings. Fuck him to hell and back. He was nothing, now that school was out, over, and done with forever. He was pasteboard where power had stood. Wink at some *other* piece of tail, you jackass, she thought.

It made her laugh.

"What's so funny?" Rocky asked.

"Yeah, babe. What gives?"

"None o' your beeswax," she said.

Soft sadness through the speakers. "Can you all hear me?" A squeal. He backed off. The feedback died.

"Maybe not now," Cobra said with a leer, "but me 'n' old Rocky here'll crop it out of you later. See if we don't."

"Yeah, Sandy." Rocky adopted Cobra's macho stance. "Double welts for you tonight!"

"Promises, promises," she said.

She caught Mimsy and Bubbler pointing at her, fellow cheerleaders who were a longstanding item. The prissy pair of boob-and-panty-flashers acted stunned.

Well, fuck them too, she thought.

Futzy Buttweiler tapped on the mike, leaned around looking, tapped it again, looked closer and flicked a switch on its neck, then tapped it once more. This time, thunks sounded.

He cleared his throat.

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Gerber felt like a shirker.

He'd done the flag thing, the colored light thing, the setting up of the mike, the series of bells by which the senior class got herded here and there for the slaughter and the okay-you-can-get-up-now stuff.

All that stuff.

From where he stood, looking down on the prom, he had done all the right things. But he hadn't hovered as he usually did. He hadn't been seen by all the right people.

Gerber was spooked.

Maybe it was the big red monster in the center of the gym. Its face was plenty creepy. The ferocity of its stance made electricity shoot up his spine and into his partial brain. He could shut his eyes, or go as far away as his shoes would carry him. But still, them lightning sparks did their upshoot thing and the cold eyes stuck in that wicked red face penetrated deep inside him and urged him to do bad things.

He gazed down.

Ants. The spotlight bandstand. The big red monster and the dead girls. Spiffed-up seniors milled or stood in clumps on the sawdust.

Something kept Gerber company that night, but he didn't really want company.

Shadows moved.

Even up here.

Was it him? His feet suggested where to go next. He could already see himself there.

Life weren't fair.

You grew up, got overzealous, maybe one or two people died what ain't hadn't oughta.

So what?

But that weren't how society saw it. Nope, they cut the bad urges out of your brainpan and chucked the cut part in the trash. Made you safe again. They thought. Made you productive and put you in a janitor suit so's you could serve a good function for your fellow man. They thought.

Huh.

Their knives weren't so smart.

But he wasn't about to tell them so. Maybe he knew shit little, like they said. But he knew that if he told them, they would open up his skull all over again, take out the whole damn thing this time, and toss it in the trash.

O' Gerber was too wily for that!

But he was spooked tonight, for sure. He would catch hell for doing or not doing some shit, though he'd done everything he was sposta oughta. Maybe that was the meaning of the shadows and the sounds.

Guilt goblins.

Conscience. That thing without which he'd been operating before they sliced his head open. Maybe it was filling in the empty spaces.

Great. Useless stuff. Hope I don't catch any o' that, he thought.

Then he saw the shadow again, even way up here. And he lowered his head and put his big hands on top of it, cringing and feeling tears come into his eyes.

Go away, he thought. Go away.

His feet wanted to move again.

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Jonquil stood less than ten feet from the slain girls, sniffing the as-yet subtle smell of death.

No, that wasn't quite right.

Pesky's ribboned belly had begun to steam with a stenchy redolence that pleased her, that stoked her lust and made her think of later.

For the past many years, Jonquil had taken to marauding after the prom. She would find some neighborhood in an obscure section of Corundum, draw a bead on some lonely guy or gal or couple through their window, and fuck the juice out of them. Totally anonymous, dressed like a slut on the troll, she acted with complete abandon.

She loved it.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . ."

Futzy's voice faltered. He struggled to regain his composure.

Jonquil wondered where Gerber Waddell was. He hadn't been around all night. Usually he hung about on the periphery of the prom. In some ways Gerber was the prom, hints of violence behind his soothing exterior.

She found other reasons to wonder.

There was something strange about Flense's body. The solid white of her gown was now wet with blood. It hadn't been so when they carried her in. An inner wound only now soaking through? Jonquil didn't think so.

"You have passed a very important stage in your life, a stage that . . . ." Futzy paused.

A blotch suddenly bloomed on Flense's right breast, a bright red blotch completely separate from the ribside Jonquil had been looking at.

The blood wasn't coming from inside Flense at all.

From Pesky? Not a chance. Her corpse faced another way.

Jonquil looked up, noting moisture on the Ice Ghoul's cheek, a drop at the tip of its beakish nose. Leaks in the roof, Claude had guessed. She watched the drop elongate and detach. A spangle of rain. She fancied she could see the spatter hit Flense and widen the red blotch.

A neuron fired in Jonquil's brain.

Not water. Not water at all.

"My friends," said Futzy, departing from his text, "I have to admit to some confusion. Sheriff Blackburn should have been here by now."

That was true, thought Jonquil. Futzy had made no big deal about it, which was perhaps why she hadn't noticed it before. Ordinarily, the sheriff would remove the padlock from the gym's outer door and slip in. By now, he should have been standing by the bandstand, ready to spout his drivel about the community, their new role in it, all that grown-up crap.

"What gives?" Claude came up beside her.

"I don't know."

"But there's something far worse," said Futzy, "than the sheriff's absence."

"Oh my," Claude murmured, "our beloved leader's about to lose it."

"With good reason, I'm afraid," she said. Through a sea of bobbing heads, near chaperone corner, she noticed the strange couple, Brayton and his date. They had this look, a look that bespoke knowledge.

Interesting.

Something more than bloodlust wriggled its sensuous way through Jonquil. She felt, in that tip-tilted gym, as if they were all standing on the deck of a vast ship. Below them, a boiler stoked with rage—more rage than Jonquil had felt in years—was poised to explode.

Futzy's halting words, the blood dripping from above, the odd couple whose presence somehow tied it all together—these things caressed her so violently, she teetered on the brink of jumping her snooty colleague's bones right there on the dance floor.

On Flense's chest, fingers of blood stretched to grope the dead girl's breast, a clotted palm moist upon her nipple.

"The slain pair you have brought in . . . ," said Futzy.

Oh my God, Jonquil thought. Sometimes you knew, by the way someone began, how they'd end.

And he did. "The slain pair you have brought in," he repeated, "are not those who were slated to die."

There was a beat before the sound began.

Then it was suddenly there, like waves of ants scurrying underfoot at the destruction of their anthill.

Jonquil herself gave a sharp *ah*, her hand to her mouth. She saw Brayton squint and grab his date's arm. Raven had gone white, but the starch hadn't left her face, that stubborn grit Jonquil had found so alluring when they met.

"Pescadera Carbone and her escort are not the designated victims. I . . ."

"Great," said Claude over the tumult. "Just when the school needs a true leader, our beloved Futzy crumbles."

Then the tenders whose birth timing and the luck of the draw had spared came deadmarching into the gym with their dates. A couple of wrestlers carried the corpses of Butch and Zinc.

"Oh my God." This over the mike. "Sheriff Blackburn should be . . . does anyone know where the sheriff is?"

A second dead couple, one of them a tender.

Jonquil felt her knees buckle at the sight. She clung to Claude's arm, moved in, wanting so badly to kiss him.

But he reared back. "Wait now," came his objection.

Then she heard the sound above, like a diver leaving a springboard. She looked up and saw the falling body.

Impressions through colored light. Something unraveling. A sandbag. Stocky like their missing sheriff. It was Sheriff Blackburn, his eyes bugged out in disbelief, thin glistening erections of zoom. It made not an ounce of sense.

Then he hit the end of the rope, a groan and hold above, and the glistening erections shot from his eyes.

What were they?

One smashed on the floor and skittered like a scattering of hockey pucks. Ice, thought Jonquil. Icicles. But the other hurtled through the air, a javelin, straight toward Jiminy Jones.

If instinct hadn't made him wince and try to sidestep it, the icicle would have whisked past him. As it was, he flinched into its path, took it full in the right eye, and reared back like a catcher's mitt on the rebound.

Without a sound of protest, he fell backward. His trumpet dropped from his hands. A clatter of crumpled brass rang out where it fell. The dying bandleader twitched on the risers.

At his rope's end, the sheriff jinged this way and that, a naysaying puppet saying *No! No! No!* then oscillating into dead sways.

Amid the screams and shouts that surrounded them, Jonquil, helpless in Claude's capable arms, rang in with a triple orgasm, wave upon wave of fear and lust and anger informing it, full out.



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