

15. Buttweiler in Charge

Futzy felt baffled, befuddled.

Never in the history of Corundum High had things gone awry at the prom. Sure, one or two inept slasher-teachers had been killed by their intended victims. But that was a turnabout to be expected every so often.

What confronted the principal tonight was sheer madness.

He spoke above the hubbub. For a time, his personal problems took a back seat to this new urgency. His head felt as if it might explode, but somehow his words gathered authority.

"Students," he said. "Students."

They ignored him, churning like thick taffy.

"Students." Calm, persistent.

At the corner of Futzy's eye, Jiminy Jones's body twitched. Brest and Trilby, standing with Bix by the refreshments, rushed into the hallway and were gone. Futzy had heard a rumor that their daughter was holed up in the school. More than likely, they had gone to check on her.

A nub of crowd started to drift that way. Futzy couldn't have that.

"Students."

They were quieting. The sheriff's sway at rope's end had settled slow and easy, like a tire swing.

"You all need to get a grip on yourselves. Get a grip. Calm down and get a grip."

He repeated the phrase, trying to seize on their chattering minds.

"Get a grip. That's it. You can do it. Stay here. Stay right here in the gym. It's the safest place to be. The killer could be anywhere out there. There's safety in numbers."

Use fear to halt the mass exodus before it begins.

"I want you to spread calm. Not panic. There's no need for panic. Hold one another. Assure one another. We're in control here."

Jesus, what a lie.



"Teachers and chaperones, please make your way to the bandstand. That's it. Steady as she goes. We're in control here. We'll figure out the best course of action and restore order, calm, peace, serenity. That's it. We're doing fine. Everything's under control."

Adora Phipps was standing close by.

Elwood Dunsmore sidled his way through the crowd on the right.

Jonquil Brindisi, clutching Claude Versailles' arm, wore a strange shiny-eyed smile as they approached.

"You folks are handling this just fine."

He raised one finger in a be-right-back gesture. Then he crouched at the edge of the riser.

The Borgstroms, the white-haired notched elders, had risen and were coming forward.

Nurse Gaskin hesitated, unsure whether faculty and chaperones meant her. Futzzy motioned her over, blue dress, short dark hair, Kitty's age had she lived.

"Delia," he said to the nurse, "try to find Gerber so we can get the lights turned on full. Elwood, I want you and . . ." Brest Donner's husband Bix arrived on the left. "I want you and Bix to hack down the sheriff's body, if you will. Then toss a blanket or something over Jiminy Jones. Please."

"No problem, Futzzy," said Elwood, his army brainwashing kicking in. Bix looked less certain. But he nodded and started to leave with the shop teacher.

"Oh, wait, Elwood." Almost let him get away. Chaos contrived sometimes to muddle the brain.

"Something else?"

"You don't have a key to the front padlock?"

"No, sir. Only the sheriff has that."

"Search him. I doubt you'll find it. How soon could you saw through the padlock? It's pretty thick."

Dunsmore grimaced. "Hell'd freeze over first. Maybe an acetylene torch. Get one from the shop, wheel it over, heat up the steel, lever a blast of oxygen at it, we ought to be through in two minutes. I'll need to have a look at the lock though. They've come up with a new tempered steel that resists just about everything."

"Try it anyway." Futzzy dismissed him. "Jonquil, take over the mike. Talk about the vices in that winning way of yours. Harden them. Calm them. Make them ready for whatever might be coming down the pike."

"What about you?" Jonquil asked, a defiant little bitch as usual, forever implying inadequacies in him.

"I'll be back soon. I'm going to my office—"

"I'll go with you," Miss Phipps chimed in.

"—try the phone there, call for help if the line's up, get my gun in any case. Claude, check the pay phones. Rumor has it they're dead, but I want to be sure. Be super cautious out there and return straight to the gym when you're done, give Jonquil some backup at the mike."

"How about us?" Mr. Borgstrom radiated a soft savage bloodlust that was lovely to behold. "What can we do?"

Futzy nodded. "You and your wife stay close by. Provide moral support. With your help, we'll survive this."

The eager old couple grinned, their lobes long sucked dry of juice and withered with age. Oldsters were usually a royal pain, their rutted thought patterns blocking the crosscut blasts of creativity. Not these two. An engaging insanity lit their limpid eyes.

Futzy rose again to the mike.

He had cobbled together a plan. Was it any good? He had no idea. Sometimes it sufficed, at least for a time, just to have one.

He summarized it for the senior class.

Then he turned the mike over to Jonquil Brindisi and headed, Adora Phipps at his heels, toward his office.

Tweed suddenly wanted very badly to be home under her comforter. She didn't feel at all like a grown-up. She felt like a sniveling little kid in need of serious daddying.

Through mercurochrome swirls of light were carried the bloody corpses of Butch and Zinc, the two trumpeters who would trumpet no more. Broken necks, torn eye sockets, deep ripped slashes across their chests. Zinc had been a tender, exempt from all violence, a fortunate white-ball plucker who had struggled to suppress a smile as he walked off the auditorium stage a week ago Thursday. That made his death unspeakably worse.

The wrestlers carrying them laid them before the Ice Ghoul. There was room beside the pair of slain girls. Sheriff Blackburn's body swayed from its rope at one edge of the sacrificial platter.

The principal tried to calm everyone. But it was hard to process his words.

Tweed's father had reason to fret. The phones had been dead. Maybe he would call the cops. Maybe they'd break in any moment now to rescue them. Her knees felt weak. *Now*, she thought. Break in *now*. But the nightmare continued.

Wherever her eyes alighted, looks of panic punched through a restless mill of classmates.

Her boyfriend shivered audibly.

"Oh, Dex, I'm scared."

"You're telling me," he said, admitting his own terror.

The killer's malevolence lay everywhere, eye and hand full of power. Dex's sax strap. Tweed had a sudden fear that it might be yanked up at any moment. His neck would snap. She gripped it, wrenched it over his head, and flung it into the churning crowd.

"Hey, what're you—?"

Tweed hugged Dex fiercely. His balance went haywire. But he steadied himself and hugged her too, his warm sweet head tucked alongside hers. "I love you, Dex."

"It's okay. We'll get through this." His words were an echo of Mr. Buttweiler's. "We'll stay here like Futzy says and we'll be safe. He and the teachers'll figure something out."

"Whoever's doing this is gonna kill us all."

"No he won't."

"He will. I know it." It wasn't over yet. Not by a longshot.

"Don't work yourself up," said Dex. "You're spooking *me* now. It'll be okay. You'll see." His hands comforted Tweed at her waist.

Everyone had so bunched toward the front that the gym felt suddenly packed, dense with fear and restlessness. Towering above, the Ice Ghoul, its face set in chill triumph, seemed to see many more bodies strewn before it. It lusted after broken bones, torn limbs, fluttered flesh—far more sacrifices than had been laid before it.

Knife raised high.

Crude cock viciously erect.

Knees and bent legs. Feet like a runner's poised at the starting block. Buttocks splayed over one heel.

Its hunger was limitless, its cruel red maw only now beginning to be filled. Tweed hugged Dex closer. She wanted to turn away from those dark eyes, but they held her in their sway, made her look, made her shudder.

Trilby feared she would pass out when rumor came, then was confirmed, that the slain girls had been found in the faculty lounge. Brest held her. A wash of sound rushed through her brain, white noise before a swoon.

"But *Pill* is in there," she said. "We've got to—"

"Come on," said Brest. "Bix, you stay here."

"I'd better go with you."

"No, Futzy's gonna need your help," insisted Brest. "Me and Trilby'll be careful."

Trilby had resisted fainting, the gymnasium taking on its painful reality around her. She followed Brest past the refreshment table to the entrance.

The corridor shone with a feeble light full of shadows and menace. That didn't matter. Nothing mattered but finding her way to Pill. Trilby prayed her daughter hadn't been killed.

Or maimed.

Or kidnapped.

At a run, they passed by the array of phones, a wall of glassed-in trophies, the entrance doors secured with the lock Elwood Dunsmore had snapped shut. The faculty lounge at the far corner of the building seemed miles away.

"Pill? Honey?"

Trilby shouted the words. Fear gave them a sharp edge. She worried it would terrorize Pill further.

The cherry-stained door of the lounge hung ajar, but no reply came.

Brest shoved the door wide open.

Trilby rushed past.

Spatters of blood by the paper cutter. On the floor. On the—Oh, my God!—on *and running down* the splintered wood of the coat closet.

"Pill?" A sob choked her. "Pill? It's Mommy."

Brest grabbed the knob, silver smeared with streaks of blood.

Trilby would have eased the door open, but Brest, always more violent and impetuous, flung it back and held her splayed fingers out to catch the rebound as it banged off the wall.

Pill sat cowering in the corner.

No blood.

In her arms, held so tight as to deform its plush body, Gigi the goat tried to comfort her.

Her face held shock. Her eyes took their time focusing. She looked smaller, every limb tight, as if the muscles tensed around her bones drew all her flesh inward.

"Come on out, Pill," Brest said.

But Trilby tore past her, went into the coat closet, crouched to her child and peeled her from the flimsy wood walls and into her arms. Her skin felt ice cold.

"Mommy?" A voice barely audible. "Mommy?"

"Yes, Pill. It's Mommy. Mommy's here. You're safe now." Nothing mattered but holding and soothing her little girl.

Brest's attempts to break them free of Bix and trio them up with Delia Gaskin, Bix's openly expressed wish for extramarital affairs, Trilby's own subservience to Bix and Brest, not just under the riding crop but in everyday life—none of that mattered now.

The one thing of importance in the world was hugging Pill. Bringing her back. Healing her in the days ahead, once this nightmare was over.

"He killed them, Mommy."

"I know he did, Pill. But he's gone now and Mommy is here and you're safe. Safe as can be."

"The man in the janitor suit. I saw his hand. It had a knife in it. The girl was just asking. That's what she said. I'm just asking. But he killed her." Her voice, weak as tea, lanced Trilby's ear with hurt.

She rocked her little girl there on the floor of the coat closet.

Brest's shadow fell on them.

The child suddenly let go of her goat and groped at her mother, her head nestling deep into Trilby's neck, her hands as clingy as claws high up where the shoulderblades nearly met over her mother's spine.

"He killed them both, Mommy."

"I know he did, Pill," she soothed. "I know."



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