

16. In the Midst of Mayhem, Love

Bray and Winnie had entered the gym with the bodies of the dead trumpeters, stunned at the savagery of the kill.

Bray nodded as his date—that's how he had begun thinking about Winnie—angrily abandoned her optimism. They followed the seniors, attached to the crowd but not integral to it, off far enough that no one could hear their conversation.

She understood now, she said, that their killer friend wasn't the champion she had believed him to be.

Disillusionment lay bitter upon her face.

Then they had seen the slain girls and "Oh, Jesus," Winnie had said, nearly in synch with his unspoken thoughts.

The sheriff had fallen.

The bandleader.

And Bray understood that he and Winnie, there under false colors and archly eyed by the amazing Miss Brindisi, were quite possibly in the deepest of shit one could be in.

Through the principal's speech, through the huddle of faculty and the uneasy buzz of students, Bray held Winnie. She seemed airless, without focus. A forlorn sylph. Even in her distraught state, he thought, she was gorgeous.

He would protect her.

He felt brave. He didn't know why such a feeling had come to him, but it had.

While Winnie, gung-ho for glory at the start, had deflated, Bray had somehow gained in strength. Poor lamb. They would survive this night somehow. Then they'd go off and start a life together.

Her head suddenly twisted up, her eyes newly flaring. "Where's that packet from Fronemeyer's house?"

"In the car. Why?"

She slumped back down. "Great."

"Except for this." He reached into his tuxedo jacket and pulled out the thick sheaf of twice-folded paper. "In case we wanted to go exploring, I thought—"

"The map!"



He unfolded it like a flower coming into bloom. Four pages, stapled, the top one with a three-digit combination Bray guessed allowed the designated slasher, and him only, access to the school's secret passageways.

"We could—"

It occurred to him too. "Of course." Their means of escape. Why hadn't he thought of it?

"—find him," she said, "and reason with him."

"It's our way out." Then Winnie's words registered. "Hey, wait a minute. I'm not gonna let you get *near* our madman. He's wiggled out. He'll kill us both."

"No, listen." Winnie paused.

Bray could tell she had been ready to go at him again. To attack his cowardice. But now her mind slipped into gear, more furious in its cogitations than he'd ever seen it.

Jonquil Brindisi stood at the mike. Two men were near the Ice Ghoul, hacking at the rope that held the dead sheriff aloft.

Winnie's hands danced in colored light as she pieced things together. "We find him," she said. "We sneak up on him, overcome him, maybe knock him out. Then we reason with him, we talk to him, for as long as it takes. We get in touch with his problem, soothe him, convince him he's already done enough to solve it. Then we get him to confess, give himself up, make a speech to the press, go national."

"Oh sure, Winnie. And he's just gonna go along—"

"Yes. He will."

Bray stopped speaking. Her certainty never ceased to amaze him.

"He *will*. No two ways about it. I can do it. I can convince anybody of anything."

"I've got a better plan," he said.

They blended into the crowd in a reasonable fashion. But Bray felt that a spotlight had been trained on them. At any moment, Jonquil Brindisi would point an accusatory finger at them and have them torn apart, fatter bait for the frenzy that lay just beneath the surface for the poor panic-stricken kids around them.

"Here's what we do," he went on. "We escape into the hidden backways. We find the designated slasher's private parking area. Using his car, we blow this town, this state, this whole wretched nation. And we start a new life together, plain and simple, somewhere else."

"They hunt us down." She said it as if she could see it. "They scapegoat us for tonight's outrages. They toy with us on the tube. They tear us apart, they torture us. They put us on *Notorious* next year, an extra special three-hour version, a slow hellacious juicing."

She made him see it.

The pauses between sentences, the stare full of import and meaning, made him see it.

Winnie's arms came about him, her lips near his friendship lobe. "Bray, my strange lovely man, one way or another, they'll fry us. Finding the killer is our only choice."

Bray could hear Jonquill's words at the mike. Tough talk, thrusting iron rods up into youthful backbones. Without looking at her, he knew she was brooding on them. Her accusation might come at any moment.

Winnie felt warm and solid in his arms.

"Do you understand?" she murmured.

He kissed her neck, her cheek, her lips. Her nape felt so perfect against his palm.

"Let's go," he said, determined. "Let's find him."

Winnie took his hand. They sauntered toward the door the two women had rushed out of.

Bray thought they'd be halted at any moment. "Wait a minute," her stern sexy voice would rise, "where do you think *you're* sneaking off to?"

But through his envelope of fear, past the refreshments and out the door to the hallway, Bray and Winnie walked hand in hand, toward a meeting Bray wasn't looking forward to at all.

On the way to his office, Futzy wracked his brain for a suspect, sharing those that came to mind with meek mousy Miss Phipps.

Maybe Zane Fronemeyer had gone insane. But anyone acquainted with Zane would scoff at the very idea.

Might it be the mean-eyed, blubber-chinned cashier in the cafeteria, Skaya something, whose face looked as though she'd been pickled in bile from the moment she was born?

Or one of the newer faculty members, the untried, untested, unknown, indeed unknowable ones fresh out of college?

"Gerber Waddell," Miss Phipps suggested.

Futzy stopped on the stairs.

The building smelled musty, layered with dust.

"Gerber," he repeated, mulling it.

They continued upstairs. Futzy was deep in thought. He hadn't seen the janitor since the lights dimmed and rainbowed. Had Gerber, in his years of subservience, finally somehow triumphed over the intent of his lobotomy?

Each year, Gerber changed the designated slasher's combination to the backways. He wrote it on the map contained in the slasher's packet. Did anyone else know it? No one at all. Gerber always surreptitiously slipped it in, last thing before delivery. Futzy himself made a special point to avert his eyes when he gaped the mouth of the envelope to receive it.

Futzy opened his office door for Miss Phipps. As she walked past him, he caught a hint of her perfume. Lilac? Some old lady scent. Her dress was dark velvet, swaying at the ankles. Old lady dress. A crime. Behind her gold-rimmed glasses, her young face made a thin oval.

"Find the snubnose," he said. "Top drawer, I think. I'll check the phone. Be careful with the gun. It's loaded."

"All right."

He moved to the desk and lifted the receiver.

No dial tone.

The lines had likely been cut somewhere deep in the building. But it felt as if his lair had been violated.

Gerber, the shy feeb.

It had to be him. Somehow, Futzy would find him, put a bullet in what was left of his brain, spare him the torment of being sentient when the graduating class sailed into him.

Miss Phipps rummaged in the desk drawer and lifted something out. She raised it. Against her delicate fingers, Futzy saw the velvet backing. "Is this her?" she asked. "Your daughter?"

"How . . ." *dare you*, he was about to say.

She picked up on it, flustered: "I'm sorry, I—"

"No, wait. It's all right." Futzy approached Miss Phipps, her look of fright softening at his reassurance. "That's her. Yes. That's my little girl. My Kitty."

"She's beautiful."

"She is," he said. "She was."

Miss Phipps sensed the rawness in his voice. She set the picture facedown in its drawer, which she closed. Her eyes glowed with compassion. Her body moved closer.

"Now wait a minute," he said.

Something was blossoming in her eyes, behind those prim frames.

"I don't *want* to wait any more," she said.

Futzy took in her ache, her mouse-beauty, the look he had always assumed meant nothing more than bland respect. Now, as she came near, that look softened into something else, something warm and inviting.

"You're . . . I'm—"

She surged toward him, a velvet dream, her lobebag angling as her head tilted in. A tight lipline puffed and swelled and touched his mouth, tasty, warm, moistening beneath the flicker of her tonguetip.

Some women came at you, when the moment finally arrived for such a bold move, tentatively, their hips seemingly dead, their torsos not much better. Adora Phipps wasn't like that.

Her whole body, behind its deceptive folds of old-lady velvet, exuded urgency, pushing against him in a solid wave of *give me, give me*.

Futzy's hands glided past her waist to her rump. The fabric slid over naked curves of flesh.

No undergarments.

Adora broke the kiss and hugged him fiercely, grinding herself into him.

"I don't think we should—"

"Shut up, you!" she said, forcing his lips open with hers, tonguing him as her hands snaked below his belt and found his zipper. The mousy little English teacher, bold as any whore, had backed him up against his desk.

His hands rose and clutched as they bunched up vast accumulations of velvet, shoving them up her body like rolls of hippo fat, gathering more and more of the stuff to make them heavier still.

His organ popped out into Adora's hand, just that little bit longer and fatter for the Tuffskin he had beefed himself up with.

She eased him back. Futzy felt hem, naked thighs, and perfectly cuppable buttocks, her cleft moist and jesus christ warm and wondrous where his fingers brushed it.

Something, a pen set, jabbed against his coat. Then it gave way, propelled off the front of the desk to smash against the floor.

Adora pillowed Futzy's head on an unabridged dictionary and climbed aboard him, an animal, this prudish covert brainy genius thrusting her taut love-sleeve down about him, deep to the balls, riding him, her hips in sexy sway, her face hypnotic, her eyelids shut, a sheen of lovesweat even now beginning to glow upon her brow.

Futzy swam in revelation.

Opaque encounters now came clear, the many odd looks she had given him: her love for him, and, far stranger, his love for her.

He wanted her, he needed her, he adored her.

In a matchless conjoining of flesh, Adora rode him, her balance precarious but for Futzy's hold upon her waist. He worried about her knees, a hard polished glass surface to either side of the blotter. But Adora, consumed in ecstasy, paid them no mind. She muffle-moaned into his mouth, getting off, her hip thrusts and her fierce climax bringing him off as well.

Into her sweet waiting lovewomb, Futzy arced his seed, the pair's urgency fueled by years of denial and by what was transpiring in the gym.

Adora collapsed upon him, exhausted, laughing aloud. He fancied the glass top, stretched almost to shattering, might give way beneath them.

"Whew."

"No kidding," he said. "I think you found the gun."

"I most assuredly did." Her eyes glistened above their shared laughter.

He looked at her. "You're my wife!"

"I don't think so."

"No, I mean *really* you are. We're in a tight spot—"

"Well *you* certainly are." She gave his cock a vulval squeeze.

"—we, unnngh, I mean there's no time for bullshit at a time like this. We could die at any moment. You and me are crazy to be doing this and I love it. I love *you*. In the morning, if we're still alive, I'm reclaiming my life, I'm putting my foot down, I'm ordering the sorry bitches I married to pack up and get out."

"They've hurt you," she said. "I've heard stories."

"I let them do it. I needed it. I don't need it any more." It was true. Adora had broken a logjam in him, one that had robbed him of years of happiness.

Right now, however, he had a school full of terrified students to save. *They may be shits*, thought Futzy, *but they're all mine*. Eventually the little savages would throw off their inanities and insensitivities, straighten the warps in their warped little noggins, and grow into the imperfect adults we've somehow managed, the rest of us, to become.

"I love you, Futzy."

"I love you too, my sweet Adora Phipps." He gave her a quick kiss. "We've got to go." She nodded. "But this isn't over. This has only begun, you understand?"

"I do."

A humming kicked on. The service elevator on the far side of the wall was in operation. During school hours, a host of sounds masked it. But here, at night, with the throb of music no longer pounding in the gym, the elevator's hum could not be mistaken.

They heard its door open.

Something rumbled out, into the hallway, just outside the principal's office.

Futzy helped Adora off, the flesh that joined them reluctant to let go. The snubnose lay in the middle drawer. He drew it out, moving swiftly and soundlessly to the door.

Adora swayed behind him.

Get back, he motioned. Then he yanked the door open.

The stench of death assaulted them.

A clothesrack. A confused tangle of limbs, oddly bent, more flesh than went with two bodies.

Then Adora gasped and Futzy resolved what he was seeing.

Not two but four bodies.

The zipper-mouthed boys zipped together, clothed and bloody.

And the girls who went crazy over them, naked, broken-limbed, somehow joined at the crotch. Bloody gleams of zipper. The rumors about them were true.

Adora gripped him from behind. She bit his shoulder through a thickness of suitcoat, saying nothing. Then her sobs took on volume, and the depth of her fright set his own mood plunging.

Matthew Megrin had never been the designated slasher. But he knew, as did most teachers, the location of the unassuming, vine-hidden, slightly rundown garage a block east of school.

It was tucked into a quiet residential alley. A punch code that ought to have changed each year, but never did, secured the garage. The teachers knew it and kept it secret to avoid the inevitable student pranks.

Rolling down his window, Matthew punched in FUTZYB. The garage door opened. His mind dwelt on the unknown slasher, on his daughter, and on his drowned wives, fluxidermed in the vestibule of his home.

Cam and Arly's death had been terrible and swift, an act of God.

Tweed's death, if indeed it had happened, would be a perversion, the assumption of godlike power by mere mortals.

Inside, a bend of lights lit a ramp that corkscrewed down out of sight. To hell with the law, thought Matthew, and drove ahead. In the rearview mirror, as his descent began, the garage door rumbled shut.

The dirge once more filled his mouth, wordless, full of ire and regret, an opera hero, treacherously murdered, gone down to death. The song, as did his mind, danced with fire. Someone must pay, it said. Wrongful death must not go unpunished.

But hope burned strong as well.

On the phone, the woman's voice had spoken of possible salvation, as if she, whoever she might be, would do her best to stop it.

Matthew had passed the school, its skull-flag flapping in the night breeze.

Now, parallel fluorescent lights led the way down the ramp, affixed where the damp gray cement walls met cement ceiling. A slow steady half-block of driving drew his car beneath Corundum High.

The ramp widened onto the slasher's parking area. There sat a bulky powder-blue car waiting for its owner.

Whose was it?

On school days, Matthew tended to arrive early and leave late. So his knowledge of other teachers' vehicles was spotty.

No time to rummage. It would be clear once he met the slasher, and there'd be only one such roaming the backways.

Matthew parked beside the powder-blue car, yanked up on his handbrake, and killed the engine.

"I'll *get* them," he hummed fiercely beneath his breath, "I'll *get* them."

On the driver's side of the slasher's car, in harsh light, stood an elevator.

What a joyless grimy hellhole this was. It ought to have been more inviting, a dark version of the faculty lounge perhaps.

What was he thinking?

More societal indoctrination. Years of it drummed into him, into them all.

They ought rather to shut *down* this vile place, bulldoze earth into it, strike flat the garage, close off the backways at school, close off all backways everywhere at every last high school in the Demented States of America.

It was nothing short of barbaric, this ritual slaughter of the young.

Matthew stared at the hatchet on the passenger seat. Fool thing wouldn't be needed. The anger had drained from him, leaving urgency, yes, and regret. What was done was done, though he much feared what that might be.

Leaving his car, he approached the elevator, its metal surface scarred and dinged red with age. He punched a battered silver button.

Nothing.

He tried it again, held it down.

Something connected. Motor sounds, rumblings from above. Would they betray his coming?

What did it matter?

He would find the slasher, verify the phone lady's story, milk his colleague—assuming said colleague hadn't died at Dex's hand—for details about Tweed's murder, details he would then use to shame the promgoers.

There would be no animosity, hard feelings, nor thirst for revenge against the one chosen to carry out the slash. That was an impersonal task. An honor. One did the deed, then let it fade into collective memory. To some, it was a revered act of heroism.

To others, it was a scandal.

Krantor Berryman, the earth science teacher, had been routinely shunned for years.

He had been chosen once.

Rather than take part in what he called the country's shame, he had paid his fine and served a year in prison.

Now, Matthew, as the elevator door opened and a blast of rank air billowed forth, vowed to join forces with poor Berryman.

He had gone along with the others, shunning the outspoken anti, like the rest. But all that, he vowed, would change.

Do it, thought Matthew, the sound of those words trumpeting in his ears like a clarion call.

New waves of anxiety about Tweed flooded him as he ducked into the elevator and punched for ascent.



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