

17. Darkness Descends

As she left on her assigned search for the janitor, Delia Gaskin met Brest and Trilby Donner heading for the gym.

Her longed-for lovers.

Pill clung to Trilby. the little girl's tear-stained face, blanched to the lobes, was scooped hollow. She seemed to have staggered off a rollercoaster, vowing never to ride one again.

"What is it?" asked Delia, laying a concerned hand on Brest's arm.

"She'll be okay," said Brest. "Trilby and I thought Pill would be safe in the faculty lounge. She heard Pesky and Flense being slaughtered. She even saw part of it through a crack in the closet door."

Concern washed through Delia. "Does she need to lie down? There's a nice comfy bed in the dispensary."

"Do you want to, honey?" Trilby asked.

Pill shook her head decisively. She gripped her mommy's waist tighter than ever.

There would be no chance, thought Delia, to do her nurse number on the frightened child.

Not yet anyway.

"The poor girl's really upset," Delia said. "Did she get a good look at the slasher?"

"Not from what we can tell," replied Brest. "Just a lot of noise and voices, a knife flashing by, an arm in a dark blue sleeve."

"Sounds like Gerber Waddell."

"That's what we're starting to think. We're wondering if maybe the surgeons missed one small chunk of brain and his dormant urges are just now catching up with him. He's reverting to what he was."

"Futzy sent me to find him and get him to turn the gym lights up full. Sounds like you two haven't seen him."

"Not a sign," said Trilby, Pill staring up at Delia from her mommy's waist. "I haven't seen him all night."

"Well, I guess I'll check the band room."

"Be careful," said Brest, glints of lust peering through her concern.



"Don't worry. I'm stronger than I look." Delia smiled grimly and left them.

Glancing back, she saw Bix come up to them, his gaze drawn to the child, then shooting along the hallway toward her.

Fucking nuisance. The one damned thing that stood between her and his wives.

She reached the band room door and tossed another glance backward. There was Bix, still staring at her as his hand caressed the back of his child's head.

He would come after her. Delia could sense it. He would make his move.

And she would make hers.

She pushed open the door. The shadows were darker in here, a lone dim lightbulb casting much of the room into obscurity. It was a decidedly creepy place, what with the tall gray semicircle of doors, each concealing instruments and music stands. And possibly more.

It was quiet here too. The stillness of a volcano readying to erupt.

No janitor of course. Delia had known she wouldn't find Gerber here. But she supposed she ought to try a few doors, if only to go through the motions.

A noise behind her.

Big surprise: Bix Donner walked in.

She hoped he had been circumspect.

"Hi, there." Almost a whisper in church. "Mind some company?"

"You never give up, do you?"

Bix chuckled softly. "Nope, not where a beautiful babe like you is concerned. Cupid's arrows pierce deep." He approached her, each level of wood flooring groaning as he ascended.

"Did you tell your wives where you were going?"

"I told them I'd take a spin past the science labs, see if our killer shows himself. He's gotta be one sick gent, a real nutcase. But if I could come at him *mano a mano*, I'll bet I could take him."

"Heroics, huh?"

Bix shrugged. "Why not? Maybe that's the way to my Delia's heart. Unless of course . . . you'd like to give in to your little Bixie-poo right now."

He took a step closer.

Delia held her ground.

"Unless," he said, "you'd like him to kiss you right where you stand."

She sensed heat and a faint whiff of musk lifting off his body. His hungry eyes peered out of the obscurity, searchlights slashing nightfog to ribbons.

"I'll tell you what I'd like," said Delia, swaying with him, almost touching him, toying, tantalizing, turning him on. "I'd like you to find our killer—"

"Ummm hmmm?"

"Walk right up to him—"

"Ummm?" Smug smile.

"And do this."

Delia's right fist was pulled close by her side, tense as a steel spring. She had kept her tone calm and casual. Now the fist shot out, a dark thunderbolt to Bix's solar plexus, knuckled, swift, deeply damaging.

He went to his knees.

Big man brought low.

His hands fumbled at her dress.

She backed away, then turned to the standing lamp.

He would take a good few minutes to recover, but Delia saw no need to wait that long.

The lamp pole was thick and securely screwed into a heavy base, an ample supply of cord coiled beside it that snaked off to a wall socket.

Delia lifted the lamp and upended it.

The on-off pull jinked against its lightbulb like a distant tricycle bell.

This is for Trilby, she thought, swinging the lamp base against the side of Bix's head with all her might.

And this is for Brest.

The first blow had collapsed him. The second came down squarely on his face, staving it in beneath the eyes. A big iron smile punched across his nose and cheeks, a pleased dent that spewed bloody ecstasy.

Damned pole wasn't long enough to keep his blood from spattering her dress.

Stability returned to the rocking room. The one pale light, moving with her attack, had made shadows dance. Now they calmed.

The Bixmeister was stone-cold dead. Could she be sure? Delia righted the lamp, slipped out of a shoe, and pressed her foot against his chest.

No heartbeat.

She toyed with smashing the lightbulb. She would grind hot shards of glass into his eyes in the darkness she had brought on, just to be sure.

But other matters needed attending to.

And the air wasn't moving above his nostrils.

Delia slipped her foot back into the shoe and wiped down the lampstand.

Should she check on the janitor? No need. His bonds were surely as secure as the last time she had checked and the time before that.

Her heart thrilled with love.

Maybe Kitty Buttweiler had been lost to her twenty years before, Kitty and her cute date slain in sacrifice to the Ice Ghoul.

But there lay now before Delia, if she played the game right, the sweet prospect of loving Brest and Trilby Donner in secret.

She had to resist the temptation to keep on killing, as strong as that temptation was. More precisely, she needed to fit each remaining death into a grand scheme that would divert suspicion to Gerber Waddell.

She turned away from the tall doors and the false walls behind them, the myriad entrances to the backways.

No.

She would leave by the band room door.

She would run in panic down the corridors to the gym.

Had blood splashed her gown? If so, that was all to the good. It would corroborate her story, make it more chilling, more convincing.

Behind her, as she left, all was still and silent.

"You're squeezing my hand," said Tweed.

Dex became aware how tense he was, from his shoulders to his fingers. He let go. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

He stroked the small of her back and gave a nervous laugh. "I'm just . . ." He set his punch glass on the refreshment table. "It's just that it's *hard* standing here doing nothing when some . . . some son of a bitch is—"

"I know, Dex."

"And Jiminy Jones. He was so *serious*, with his bristle mustache and his catch phrases about music and notes—you know, that stuff about the white is the paper and the black, *all* of it, is the music—and his angry baton slashes when the trumpets rushed."

"I liked Mr. Jones too."

Dex hung his head.

All his life, he had been steeling himself for this night, ready to fend off attack despite his fear, eager for the moment when the bell that meant freedom sounded at last.

Now that bell had rung and he had felt the elation of survival. Then he had discovered, as had they all, that their survival was by no means assured. Attack could come at random, from any quarter. It was no longer a controlled quantity within a measurable slice of time.

Dex turned to Tweed. "I want to be brave. But it's so hard. He could be anyone. He could be within reach of us right now."

"I know."

"I'm scared, Tweed. It's one thing to . . . how can I defend us from this? I'm just some stupid kid who . . . no, wait, I'm a *man*, I can do this thing, I can do it."

Then the tears came, and Tweed crushed her crinkly dress against his body. She hugged him fiercely, braver by far than he.

It wasn't fair.

He would lose her for being a coward. She would pretend nurture now, but when they were out of the woods, she would drop him for some other guy.

He had felt brave earlier. He had *prepped* for braveness. He had even secretly lusted to go into teaching one day, instilling in the young a love of the greater vices perhaps.

Like Jonquil Brindisi.

What moved people to do what they did? The question had always fascinated him. Besides, it would give him a shot at being the designated slasher some day, taking out bullies like Stymie Glumm or Angelo Manglebaum.

He would never tell Tweed's father that. Nor would he argue against the anti-slasher cause with him.

No. The law said Mr. Megrim was entitled to his opinion, as long as he limited himself to talk alone. In time, he would come to accept his son-in-law's differing stance on the issue.

Dex's tears began anew.

All of that was past.

"I've got to . . . to get it together."

"Dex," soothed Tweed in his ear, "let it fall apart for a while, okay? You're in my arms. You're safe here. Just let it fall apart. It'll come together soon enough."

Dex buried his sobs in her hair, the aroma of hair spray cloying but comforting.

As distraught as they all were, he didn't want his classmates to see him crying.

They would remember afterwards, when this nightmare was over. It might ruin his rep. It might condemn him and Tweed and their chosen mate to a life of poverty and scorn on the outskirts of society. Prom bravery counted for much. Tonight *might* be judged differently, but he didn't want to bank on that.

"I guess," he said, calming, "I guess I just prefer . . . you know, everything in its place."

"You do." Tweed stroked his hair. "You're that way. But tonight we've got to roll with the punches. It's tougher than we thought it would be, that's all."

"It is."

"Dex, just know that I love you and I'm with you, no matter what happens. Whoever's doing this will be caught, and killed, and torn apart. Futzzy and his staff will see to that. They've *got* to, they really do. Have faith in them."

"I will," he said, wiping the tears on his tuxedo sleeve.

But inside, Dex had no faith at all in Principal Buttweiler and his staff, who, from the look on their faces, had not the slightest clue about how to bring the rogue killer to justice.

Peach had never seen anyone look as stunned as Bowser McPhee.

To tell the truth, Peach couldn't believe what was going on either.

The multiplying bodies were bad enough.

Some teacher had gone off his nut.

Eventually, she had no doubt, he would be found and fattered. A few more classmates would eat it and the school would gain some notoriety, but Peach was sure she would survive.

Death—her own, that is—was not within the realm of possibility.

Bowser was a bit more upset by the killings than she. But what really seemed to torque him out, and how could Peach blame him, was Fido's reaction.

Fido had paled and woozed—and simply walked away from her and Bowser.

Right straight to the fat chicks over yonder, a pair of mustachioed slugs pup-tented in plug-ugly, wallpaper-inspired dresses whose green and magenta blooms splashed garishly everywhere.

In-fucking-credible!

"I can't believe he *did* that," Bowser repeated. "The simpering little bastard took a hike."

"He wants to marry a couple of blimps!" The nerve of anyone rejecting her for two lard-lugging losers like Kyla Gorg and Patrice Menuci.

"He was my *guy*," said Bowser. "We were gonna be together *forever*." The poor boy was really broken up. "How's he gonna get home? What'll I tell my folks?"

Ms. Brindisi and Mr. Versailles were speaking at the mike like Academy Award presenters.

The sheriff's body had been carried to the band risers, a tarp thrown over him and the music teacher.

Peach wished they had joined the other dead folks in front of the Ice Ghoul. Putting them on the risers seemed to expand the ghoul's dominion, as though the huddle of frightened seniors between the creature and the wall behind the bandstand now fell beneath its sway.

"Whynchu take Fido aside and talk it over?"

"I don't know," said Bowser, stunned all over again. "I guess I oughta do that. But I feel like saying, Fuck it to hell and back. He's not worth it, walking away like we meant nothing to one another. We were everything, Peach, I shit you not, *everything* to one another."

"So take him aside and tell him that."

And do it, oh please God yes, she thought, do it before he touches those blubbering tent-sprawls of noxious girlflab.

"I won't," said Bowser. He gritted his teeth and flexed his fists. "I can't, but I will." But before he took his first step, the teachers at the mike were saying, "Make way for her."

Make way? Who was there to make way for?

Peach, hearing fresh rumblings ripple through the crowd, craned her neck to see.

Nurse Gaskin's bobbing head moved off to the left, her hands raised to slice through a dappled sea of bodies. Someone near Peach passed along rumors of blood on her dress.

"They're saying her dress is bloody," said Bowser.

"I hear them," said Peach.

Beneath a glisten of blue and pink and orange lights, the nurse passed through a jostle of students to the risers and the mike.

She looked shaken as she shouldered the two teachers aside and clung to the mikestand, a grasp at salvation.

"It's"

She covered the mike and spoke briefly to Mr. Versailles, then back, as distraught as Peach had ever seen anyone.

"It's the janitor. We were in the band room, me and Bix Donner."

On Peach's right, a high hoot sounded from a woman holding a little girl. The woman raised a hand to her mouth. Brest Donner, Peach's biology teacher, gripped her fiercely in her arms.

Oh yeah, Ms. Donner's wife.

"I" The nurse brushed off Jonquil Brindisi's hand.

The stains on her dress sickened Peach.

She pictured Ms. Donner's husband—this Bix guy the nurse was yammering on and on about, who had helped Mr. Dunsmore cut down the sheriff's body—being stabbed by the feeb janitor, blood from the wounds spraying upward to splash Nurse Gaskin's dress.

"I yelled at Gerber," she said. "I tried to stop him. He just kept coming at Bix. Then he swung the lampstand up and slammed it down—"

The nurse covered her mouth, her eyes hot with tears.

In an instant, Ms. Brindisi was beside her again, speaking words Peach couldn't hear.

Nurse Gaskin nodded.

A final thought occurred to her.

She dipped again to the mike: "Trilby? Brest? I'm sorry."

She almost seemed to regret her own survival.

"I've always treated the poor man well. We all have. Gerber couldn't help what he was, and what he's become again. He vanished through the band room doors into the backways. I . . ."

Her hand fumbled for a tissue in her right pocket.

That's when the lights went out.

There was a loud noise, like a big switch being thrown *ker-chunk*.

The image of Ms. Brindisi and the nurse hung in a ghostly afterglow, then wiped away to black.

Peach, fear ballooning in her like a sudden burst of fever, found Bowser's waist and clung to him.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

Peach saw the janitor coming at her from all directions, that benign wisp of a grin cracking open to reveal madness, bloodlust, a rapacious urge to kill.

A voice began, booming from the PA system.

At first, she thought it was the janitor's. But the fear that quavered in the words and their deeper pitch identified the dead sheriff, speaking no doubt under duress.

"Boys and girls," said Sheriff Blackburn's voice, "the front entrance to the school is open. You must not stay in the gym. If you stay here, you will die. I repeat—"

But the voice repeated nothing.

Peach could almost see him looking up from a scripted text, looking up to see a sudden blade come sweeping in. A rushed shoved grunt of impalement had been caught on the tape, chilling in how nearby it sounded.

Faintly, over a renewed sweep of crowd noise, Peach heard Ms. Brindisi.

"Stay where you are!"

But that was futile advice.

Peach wanted out of there that instant, and every one of her classmates wanted the same.

The babble surged.

The bodies moved her, shoved her, precisely where they all wanted to go. Screams lanced through the panic. A few seniors went down in the crush. Or maybe Gerber Waddell had swept in to slaughter them. Who could say? Peach only knew she had to escape, and fast.

The opening to the dim hallway loomed before her. She shoved the kid in front of her, *Sorry* on her lips. But she wasn't sorry at all. Nor were those in back who propelled her forward.

Above the melee, loud and distorted, a sad gentle singer from the fifties sighed, "I'm Mister Blue, wah-o-wah-oo." Interspersed, Gerber Waddell's familiar chirp stole in, sharp and piercing: "Hi there, hi there."

"Oh my god, he's got me," shouted some frightened boy. The janitor strode among them, cutting, slashing, killing whatever got in his way.

Peach squeezed through the dim rectangular archway. A crush of bodies threatened to snap her ribs, so great was the pressure on all sides. But she made it to the corridor, holding miraculously to the back of Bowser's suitcoat.

The air cooled.

The flow of students carried her as swiftly as before, but with less threat of violence.

They would escape.

She knew they would.

She and Bowser, they'd be all right, no matter who else fell to the killer loose in the school.

The corridor still lit with its dim lights, the crowd rushed and shuffled toward freedom.

But screams arose from those who reached the front entrance first. Word rippled back, even as they pressed on, of fresh corpses awaiting them there.

Peach and Bowser rounded the corner.

Miss Phipps and the principal, ashen-faced, stood beside a grotesque clothesrack they had just wheeled in. It bore four broken bodies.

Elwood Dunsmore, the shop teacher, his face blasted and blackened by a smashed blowtorch, lay propped against the padlocked doors.

And impaled on the upraised knife-arm of a sculpted Ice Ghoul, dripping blood and water down the cold crystal of its body, were the corpses of Brandy Crowe and Flann Beckwith. A fresh icicle jutted from each eye, crazy antennae in a mad game of Cootie.

Frenzy surged in Peach.

And in the crowd.

Bowser's face looked ready to explode. "We've gotta get out of here," he yelled. Peach could hardly hear him through the din.

She grabbed his hand and together they raced off through fractures in the crowd.

Everybody had been set off, ping-pong balls and mousetraps.

Rude slams and brushes buffeted her, like the best of slap'n'smack dancing, only far more hectic and nowhere near as fun.

They would break free, she and Bowser.

There *had* to be a way out.

And they'd find it, her classmates be damned.

A mad scurry filled every glance she threw.

They were *all* out for survival, thought Peach. And not one of them would survive.



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