

PART FOUR. Catching the Ice Ghoul

"Most people have ears, but few have judgment; tickle those ears, and depend upon it, you will catch their judgments, such as they are."

—Lord Chesterfield

"Trust not one night's ice."

—George Herbert



18. Fear and Weapons

In the spiffy outfits the State had given them for their delivery into Zane Fronemeyer's hands, Bray felt—as they explored Corundum High's backways—like a prince with his princess passing through the scullery, the cramped living quarters of the poor.

Winnie's gown snagged on a nail and ripped.

The backways were ill-lit and dank, choked with spiderwebs and the threat of rats. The air was close and confining, hot enough to make Bray wish his tux were made of lighter stuff.

"Where are we?" asked Winnie.

"Let's see," Bray said, moving toward the next dim lightbulb, waist-high on his right.

Randomly placed along the walls, the bulbs were of minimal wattage. They glowed rather than shone. That and faint copying made the map barely readable, even when it was held inches from the light.

The designated slasher clearly needed a tiny flashlight. Bray supposed that whoever had killed Fronemeyer had taken one from the packet.

Why hadn't he taken the map? Perhaps he was already acquainted with the backways, a slasher from years past.

"I think we're beyond the auditorium. We've dipped under the corridor on the east. That way," Bray gestured right, "is the band room. See how it curves off?"

"I'll take your word for it. What's over there?"

"Cafeteria, I think. Can't tell though if it's the dining area or the kitchen."

Truth was, they could be completely turned around. Disorientation crowded all about and may already have claimed them. An adventure that had begun with confidence, as they slipped through a panel by the auditorium, now felt full of uncertainty and trepidation.

"Let's peek out and see."

"What if there's someone there? A couple of seniors?" he asked.

"What *if*?" Winnie was exasperated.

"They see us, they think we're behind the killings, a crazed student body somehow gets us, it's all over."

"Christ, Bray," she said, "do you expect to spend the rest of your life in here?"

"It's just safer, that's all. It's the prudent thing to do. He's in here somewhere, I know it."

"You're a fucking wimp."

"We'll find him. Or he'll find us." We'll fight him and kill him, he thought. "You can talk to him, you're good at that."

"That's why you jumped your prom. That's why you ran."

"You can reason with him, bring the poor guy out into the public spotlight like you want to."

"You've got no guts," she said. "I say we have a look." Even in insulting him, she was beautiful.

No way was their friendly slasher going to hold still for a dollop of argument. It was kill or be killed. That's what it would come down to.

And he'd have to save Winnie. He'd have to rip the bastard's guts out, to keep Winnie from harm and to prove to her he was no coward.

"You're wrong about me," he said.

"If only."

"Okay, let's have a look."

The panels were clearly marked, bold and readable. A large white number, in this case a 975, was painted above the release.

Bray pressed the release and the panel slid open. Cooler air and indirect light rushed in, sudden unexpected friends.

No one there.

He breathed easier.

"Bunch of tables," said Winnie behind him.

"Yes."

Six chairs were upturned on each tabletop, their metal legs like TV antennas aligned, roof after roof. Bray peered out, his thumb keeping the panel retracted.

Somewhere in the distance arose a muffled hubbub. But other than pillows against the walls and posterboard with student numbers inscribed, the cafeteria was empty.

Winnie shouldered him aside, angling for a clearer view. Her body was warm and wonderful beside him. "I guess this shows you can read a map, at least," she said.

Bray had a sudden image of someone creeping up on them in the narrow passageway, behind their backs, a knife raised, ready to fall.

"What is it?" Winnie asked.

He realized he had tensed.

"Nothing," he said.

But he drew back and Winnie came with him. He let the panel shut with a faint whoosh.

It was damned dark in here. The dank heat, woody as a fresh pine box, crept in around them again.

Bray wished his eyes would adapt more quickly to the darkness. But even when the faint outlines of the backways resolved themselves, he had the persistent feeling that someone or something held them in its gaze, waiting, waiting to rush them or to strike as they passed by.

"This is hopeless," said Winnie. "It's an endless maze. He could be anywhere. Maybe even gone home by now."

Winnie was full of surprises, thought Bray. Fired up one moment, now suddenly discouraged.

"Nope, our killer's still here," he said. "I can feel it."

"Maybe."

"No maybes. He's not finished. Sooner or later, we'll meet him. And somehow we'll stop him."

"We'll talk him down. Coax the fight out of him," she said, more assured.

"You got it," said Bray, imagining a quick tussle with an unknown assailant, tackling him from the darkness, a flashing blade, Bray's hand seizing a descending wrist to keep death at bay.

It could come at any time, from any place.

Or the knife blade might slip into them now, now, with no chance to fight back.

No.

He couldn't afford to think that way.

They'd be prepared, they'd have their chance.

He and Winnie would subdue him, slay him or deliver him up to Corundum High's freaked-out kids and faculty. Winnie would have her media moments of glory and persuasion. And one way or another, society would welcome them back into its embrace, where they could begin a life together, unharassed and free.

"All right," said Winnie with renewed resolve. "What are we waiting for? Let's press on."

"Why not," he said.

And on they pressed.

Kyla had never seen Patrice so worked up, so turned on by Fido's sudden interest in them and off by the dangers that surrounded them.

Thank God that *she* at least had kept her wits about her.

To be sure, she tickled her fancy with the riotous times that awaited their threesome, should they be lucky enough to survive prom night. But survival came first in Kyla's book, and it fell to her to figure out how to assure it.

"Keep up, you two," she said.

Behind her, a sequoia to a sapling, Patrice hugged Fido to her and hurried along, her eyes impossibly large with fright.

They had left most of the kids by the front entrance, where a futile attempt was underway to ram open the heavily reinforced doors.

Ranks of peach-colored lockers marched by on either side, any one of them ready to explode into violence. Kyla kept them moving down the center of this gauntlet, their ultimate destination Lily Foddereau's butchery wing in the back part of the school.

The least they could do was to arm themselves with *real* cleavers, not the fluttering ones, sharp but small, that hung from everyone's belt.

"Kyla, I'm scared," whined Patrice. It had become an annoying mantra, as if admitting her fear could ward off the thing that frightened her.

Kyla's cowardly lover didn't even expect an answer. But Fido, who had settled into a litany of reassurance, piped up: "We'll be fine, honey lamb. He won't get us."

Kyla understood they were both stressed to the max. But so was she.

And she didn't like how it felt when the three of them were under pressure. If indeed they survived the night, she thought there was a good chance their relationship wouldn't.

Kyla held open the glass door to the butchery wing, nose-wrinkling whiffs of gore lifting off the tile and wood as they passed. She followed after Patrice and Fido.

The stench of slaughter raised her hackles.

Curiously, it comforted her as well.

Very few students were roaming these blood-encrusted halls. Kyla guessed it was because butchery, the favorite subject of few, was far too near the night's events.

Patrice, on the other hand, loved it.

As did she.

The two of them had in fact first met, first touched eyes, over the bloody spews of a lopped chicken head. Their love, such as it was, had grown out of the slaughter of pigs and lambs and wide-eyed cattle, neck slice, abrupt collapse of unsteady legs. They had a history here, she and Patrice Menuci.

"I don't like this," said Fido.

Maybe, thought Kyla, Fido were best to have remained a fantasy. The reality was beginning to wear thin.

"It's okay, baby," Patrice simpered back. "We'll get us some steel and hole up somewhere until they rescue us."

"In here," Kyla said.

Over many years, mists of gore, especially during finals week, had turned the grout between the tiles from tan to rust. Ditto the hinges of the doors. This door's pattern of bloodspray was nearly invisible, so much a part of the woodgrain had it become.

They slipped through.

A wall of cutlery winked at them from behind Miss Smiling-Bitch Foddereau's chopping block. On the pegboard, chalked outlines surrounded each tool.

There were missing knives. But then a few knives had *always* been missing, gone astray over years of instruction and never replaced.

"Take two each," said Kyla.

She reached her heavy arms upward for her favorite hackers and hewers, huffing from the exertion. Kyla loved the heft of them, their shaped grips and perfect balance.

Fido and Patrice obeyed, laying hands on the pegboard as if it were a prayer wall and they were penitents. They came away clutching the handles of honed steel.

"What now?" Patrice asked.

She held two long carving knives, severed leg ends of a gleaming insect.

Fido had found a pair of meat cleavers.

Kyla looked at Fido and Patrice. Bedroom longings rose in her at the sextuple threat of violence that filled their fists.

In the meaty air, soft wafts of lust blew past her nostrils.

If this be life, thought Kyla, let it last forever.

Outside the band room door, Trilby hugged her little girl. Delia Gaskin had taken Brest inside to view Bix's body. Soon she would come out for Trilby.

Pill had stopped talking altogether.

Trilby thought she had seen Pill at her most frightened. But her father's death, announced so vividly at the bandstand by Delia, had driven her deeper into herself. She had shut down, drawn in tighter, her skin almost bloodless, near as white as meringue.

"It's okay, Pill," she said.

But it wasn't.

The door opened.

Delia and Brest emerged arm in arm. Brest's eyes were moist. She gave Trilby a dour look.

It seemed out of place, since Brest had, many years before, confided having fallen out of love with their husband. But even withered feelings of affection tend to sink their hooks deep into one's heart, early and enduring.

"Pill?" The girl clung to her, trying to bury herself in her mother's body. "Stay with Brest now. I need to leave you for just a little while."

Pill's fingernails deepened uncomfortably, crab claws at Trilby's back. The child moaned.

It was unbearable.

Trilby wanted to embrace her always. But she needed to see Bix in death's grip, needed the grim closure it would provide.

Brest knelt and tried to pry their daughter free. Pill's moan became a whine, then a keening.

"There, there," Trilby soothed.

Pill was a sight. A shattered child who couldn't bear, for one second, the denial of her mother's embrace.

But at last, the three of them overcame her resistance, and like a magnet giving up one steel surface for another, she lunged for Brest, almost knocking her over with the zeal of her need.

Brest awkwardly patted Pill's back, starting several times to speak but saying nothing.

Delia prompted Trilby to rise. How kind and full of caring she is, Trilby thought.

Inside the band room, the air was rank with warring odors of death.

Bix's bowels had emptied. The night before, Brest had made spaghetti. From years of marriage, Trilby knew how spaghetti altered Bix's bathroom smells. That smell now infused the band room, stenchy, homey, strangely comforting yet out of place.

Her eyes fixed on his corpse.

Bix lay there like a tosser-and-turner in a mattress ad. He had grown a little chubby around the waist as Pill advanced beyond toddlerdom.

His frilled shirt was wrenched out of his cummerbund. Trilby could see his navel and the wiry black hairs that surrounded it. The skin at his paunch did not move.

One never noticed a motion so perpetual until it ceased.

No inhale at all. No exhale.

It was maddening.

It terrified her.

Her breath caught, refusing to release. She raised a hand to her mouth.

Delia Gaskin hugged her from the side. "You okay?" she asked.

Trilby nodded. She suffered Delia's embrace, leaning on her for support.

Bix's face was an outrage.

His skull was broken and bashed. The skin at his exposed ear had shifted, a fallen fracture of shale. Blood spilled from that fracture.

His nose, crushed—the bone snapped upward at an obscene angle—sat atop a deep spewed gash, the punch of a steel fist having left moist wrinkles in the crater-edges of his flesh.

His skin had been rent asunder, as if the killer had wanted to see the man beneath the face, the secret Bix that Trilby had always suspected was there. But all that showed was inert muscle and bone.

Trilby felt faint.

But she could not tear her eyes away.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting on the edge of one of the band room's rising levels, something sharp and bitter broken under her nose. She reared back and felt Delia's arms supporting her.

"Steady, now," the nurse said.

"I'm okay," she tried to say.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her face seized up in a cry. On the inhale, she smelled her husband's corpse behind her. Then the tears subsided.

Delia offered her a tissue.

Trilby blew her nose and daubed the edges of her eyes. "You're so kind," she said. Poor lonely woman. Poor Delia.

Brest had been after her to start an affair with Delia. She had heart. Depth of character. She really cared, not just in a nursely way. It was more genuine than that.

Society called same-sex threesomes perverse.

What did society know of such things?

It wouldn't be perverse, not in the least. It would feel good and natural.

Now was hardly the time for it, but Trilby felt the nub inside her, the pull she hadn't quite felt before, the feeling Brest had, with far too much zeal, urged upon her.

Its eventuality lay before her.

"Help me out the door?" she said, her words faint.

"Of course," came Delia's concerned voice.

And the nurse's firm grip, surprisingly strong in one so trim and feminine, came about Trilby.

She rose to her feet.



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