

19. At the Mercy of the Ice Ghoul

Life was such a bitch, Sandy thought as she followed Cobra and Rocky along the second floor corridor.

Things had been thrown topsy-turvy.

There were rules. If you obeyed them, everything went fine for you. Yet, somehow—

(Just one crazy. Keep reminding yourself. It's one wacked-out maniac.)

—the rules had been thrown out the window. No rule book at all.

Waiting in the boys' locker room, Sandy and Rocky had thought themselves immune. Designated slashers never laid a *finger* on potential prom royalty. But now? Sandy shuddered. They hadn't been safe at all. Flann and Brandy had bitten it in the refrigeration room. Rival nominees. Then an exempt tender had been killed, for the love of Christ. No one was safe from the rogue janitor.

It put her entire world in doubt.

Striding alongside Rocky, Cobra reached back an index finger, hooked it into her cleavage, and pulled Sandy forward as though she were wearing a harness.

"Come on, bitch, keep up," he said, nearly pulling her off her pumps. "The Ice Ghoul'll getcha if you don't."

Cobra chuckled, digging the weirdness around them. The turn of events had confusedly torqued Rocky. Her too. But their new boyfriend seemed to be getting way the heck into it.

Crazy strength.

When Peach jilted him, they had waived the poor dejected creep in. Then the killings began to multiply, the world tilt into Cobra's sullen territory. Now Mister Bigshot Heel-Clicking Hood was steering the threesome wherever he liked.

Did that concern her?

She had no idea.

Nothing made sense but survival and Sandy's mind could only hold to that one overriding idea. There'd be time later to sort out their lives.

Twice they had counterclockwised the vast square that was the second floor hallway. Twice they had passed the same damned lockers and clocks, the same damned classrooms where she had been forced to endure Home Ec and Art and Algebra and Spanish and the ill-named "teachers" who had inflicted all of that boring crap on her.



Visions of hell.

Sandy guessed that Cobra's strategy, if he had one, was to keep going, to stay within the maundering crowd and steer clear of doorways.

He released her and lit up a cigarette, never stopping, moving forward in a confident stride.

"Hey," said Rocky, "you can't smoke in here."

"What're they gonna do?" Cobra asked with a sneer. "Kill me?"

"No, but they might expel you."

Cobra, bemused, flashed Sandy a look of exasperation. "I'll take my chances, jocko."

Rocky pointed. "There's Mr. Buttweiler's office."

"I'm acquainted with it," said Cobra.

Some kids shuffled through the principal's door, their chosen place of refuge. Had he left it unlocked? Or had the janitor's key opened it as a lure?

"Our next set of corpses."

"Come on, Cobra," said Sandy. "Don't joke about it."

"Who's joking? Those dweebs are dead."

Bloodsicks stained the tile floor outside Futzy's office. Drippings from the zippermouths. Sandy had been royally grossed out by what the killer had done—not to mention what the zipheads *themselves* had done—to their bodies.

"Can we settle someplace?" she complained.

"Good idea," said Rocky.

"No way." Cobra nixed it. His heels clacked as they walked. "Shut your traps a sec and let me think." Fumes drifted past his ears. "I got it!"

Abruptly he veered off.

They followed.

There would be time, when this was over, to right the balance. For now it was okay with her to let Cobra set the agenda.

Humming a soft song of grim determination, Matthew Megrim pressed on through the backways.

Ten minutes before, he had stepped off the elevator; it felt as if an eternity had passed.

He'd had a similar feeling years before, descending a tower of spiral stone steps in an ancient cathedral. The sameness of what passed before his eyes, then and now, drew him into a sort of circular time, his footsteps seeming not to advance him at all.

In the obscurity ahead, Matthew thought he saw a flash of white, the distant rustle of bunched cloth. An organdy dress?

He hurried onward, suppressing the urge to call out. No need to alert the slasher or put him or her on the defensive.

By the time he had gained the bend where the vision had appeared, it was gone.

Still, he pressed on more hurriedly, losing his way but trusting to luck to bring him at last into the presence of Tweed's killer.

Earlier, he had attained the walkways above the gym, a dizzying drop downward past balloons and crepe hangings and a flat-browed Ice Ghoul.

Why, he wondered, was the gym without lights? And it was so quiet, as though everyone had fled elsewhere. The only illumination came from bulbs around him, light-hoarders as always, and from the doors to the backways below.

Matthew's fancy strained downward, a platter of corpses trying to resolve itself before the Ice Ghoul.

Were there any bodies lying there at all? He couldn't tell. One moment, there were none. The next? Two, or three, or four. Inert lumps of black on black that might just as well be tricks of the air.

He thought to call out but felt it would be useless. There was no one down there to answer. And if there were, they'd know he was breaking the law and have him arrested.

Instead, he had made his way along the narrow path, crawling, feeling the smooth edges with his outstretched fingers, then taking laddered steps down into the backways again. Their familiar cloy and hug had seemed comforting for a moment. But quickly, they became once more a bewildering and hopeless maze.

The tune that circled in Matthew's head was low and ominous. Limited in scope. The noble revenge of "I'll *get* them, I'll *get* them" had been replaced with a cavelike chant in Latinate grumbles.

It didn't echo.

Even if he had let it out full instead of hoarding it inside his mouth, it wouldn't have echoed.

The close, airless wood and stone of the backways absorbed all sound, closing over it like rent skin healing after a flurry of welt-wounds. Matthew felt as if he were in a diving bell, cut off and confined, steeped in his surroundings but observing apart from them.

Into this cauldron of physical and temporal disorientation fell his hopes and fears about Tweed. One moment, his daughter was already dead and he was embarked on a fool's errand. The next, she had survived and the two of them, aided by an anti-slasher groundswell, would turn this nation around.

They were only two people.

But sometimes you got lucky. Sometimes, forces came together like waves, and you rode them and fed them until things changed.

Yes, and sometimes idiots deluded themselves and fell off the deep end into quixotic crusades. Naked emperors on parade they were, thinking they were arrayed in the finest cloth, hearing not the hoots of the mob but high hosannahs.

Something caught Matthew's eye. A shadow of darkness straight ahead roiled with movement.

Once one saw a *real* being in this impossible obscurity, one's imaginings dropped away as obvious frauds.

This vision was distant, the slow roll of a back perhaps, dark restlessness upon darkness, a form reaching for existence as it passed weak bulbs, then lapsing again into nothingness.

But always a restless motion forward.

Matthew stalked it, thinking he was gaining on it, thinking it had disappeared into the gloom, then catching sight of it once more.

An excitement grew in him, the soft melody acquiring an upbeat rhythm in its steady movement onward.

Tweed didn't like leaving Dex in the hallway. But she had to pee and this was the girls' room.

Inside, she found the lights on full. That was a relief. No one here, she thought.

But as she rounded a baffle, an ankle came into view, a dress hem, telltale red slut-heels. And there was Peach the floozy, leaning against Bowser McPhee.

"Hey, come on, you guys," Tweed said. "Boys don't belong in here."

The back of Bowser's dark combed head, an odd warped plane of skin and hair, reflected in the mirror. His coatback creased like twists of milk against the shiny jut of a sink. Dreamy-eyed, he wallowed in bliss.

"Buzz off, Tweediebird," said Peach. "Me and him are sticking together for protection."

Bowser said, "Maybe I should—"

"Hey, baby," said Peach, rubbing herself against him, "we're just getting started. Don't you move a muscle. Not *this* one anyway." Her hand slid down along his zipper, gripping the cream-white bulge below.

"Sure, cool, why not?" said Tweed, not trying to disguise her disgust. She flounced to the nearest stall, went in, and locked the door.

Let them suck lobe. Let them strip and do it right there on the scuzzy tile floor, within reach of sink pipes, scurries of hair, and decades of impacted scum no janitor's mop would ever touch.

Tweed didn't care.

Peach was a slut and Bowser was bratty and obnoxious. Fuck 'em, she thought, fuck 'em both to hell and back.

She set her purse on the silver shelf and rustled her gown and panties this way and that, planting her naked bottom on the commode's cool seat. She leaned forward intently. Her rustlings fell away. In their place, low moans and groans assaulted her ears.

Her bladder refused to cooperate.

Jesus, at a time like this!

Dex was waiting outside in the hallway, skittish as a colt, while her dad fretted at home.

By all report, the backs of restroom stalls were solid. But what if this one wasn't?

An insane janitor could do whatever he liked. He could prepare for years, breaking every rule in the book just like he'd broken a bunch tonight.

Then there was Bowser and Peach.

Sure, they were into each other. That much their ugly gruntings made clear.

But Tweed bet they each had half an ear on her, picturing her bare-bummed, waiting for that first quick splash of liquid on liquid, then a full stream.

The seconds crept by.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Soon they would notice.

They would stop what they were doing and giggle. Peach would chime in with a crude remark and Tweed's bladder muscle would seize up tighter than ever.

The pressure mounted, but the dam refused to burst. Come on, she thought, come on.

Think of something else. Let the body take over. The past hour's killings came welling up: blood, icicles, Sheriff Blackburn dropping like a sack of flour.

Strangely enough, for all his prim stiffness while he lived, it was the death of Jiminy Jones that prompted much of Tweed's shock. Short in stature, an imitative trumpet player, Mr. Jones nonetheless displayed always an infectious love of music, a love that had inspired her and Dex, that made them reach beyond the norm in their playing and in what they listened to.

She couldn't believe Mr. Jones was dead, his corpse tarped upon the risers he would no longer break down or set up. His short fat arms would no longer wave a baton at them. His tinny dictator's voice would no longer bark, "Don't *rush*, don't *rush*," in time to the strict beat he heard in his head.

Tweed's bladder let go.

Thoughts of Peach and Bowser came rushing in. But the process had been set in motion, a steady stream that would go to completion.

Did she detect any increase in their moans, anything to signal an untoward interest in her bodily functions?

None.

Surely, it had all been in her head. As usual, she had been too damned self-conscious. Her father had made a Broadway show tune out of it, even softshoeing to it and brandishing an imaginary cane and straw boater. "Get out of your head," he had sung, "and into my heart, bah-pitty bah-bah bah-pitty bah-bah-*bah*."

Tweed wiped, stood, adjusted her prom dress, and flushed.

When she emerged from the stall, she spied Bowser's white sleeve, the gold cufflink, where his right hand had disappeared in a flurry of red frills hiked high up on Peach's stockinged outer thigh.

Tweed couldn't see what Peach's hand was up to. But from her arm movements and Bowser's muffled *ung ung* where their lips met, it was easy to guess. He was so turned on that even his friendship lobe appeared to blush and swell.

Tweed pretended nonchalance.

Standing at the sink next to them, she took out a tube of lipstick, leaning forward to apply it. Smart pert babe in the mirror.

She appeared untouched by the horrors around her. But she wasn't. You couldn't tell anything from a person's outer show.

Fingers fell on Tweed's waist.

She froze.

It was Peach's free hand, caressing clumsily, working its way down the curve of her butt.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Tweed, moving abruptly left so that the hand withdrew as from an oven burn.

Peach turned upon Bowser's lips, speaking through his mindless unfocused barrage of guppy kisses. "You *want* us, Miss Prissy Perfect. It's the end of the world. Join in, indulge your whims, share the fun."

Tweed said, "Why don't you go find Cobra? Or Fido?" She put a spin on it. I've got Dex, she was saying. You two creeps have dumped your boyfriends like noseblown kleenex.

"You're here," Peach said. "They're not. Bowser's hard, I'm wet, and you look pretty tasty. Doesn't she, Bowser, sweetie?"

"Arf, arf," he said, giving Tweed a dark, zitful leer.

Tweed glared. "Not interested."

She looked back at herself in the mirror.

One last touchup.

Somewhere nearby, she had the sudden sense of . . . something awful.

She couldn't pinpoint it.

It felt all-surrounding, as if the mirror's reflexiveness threw off her instincts, her fight-or-flight response.

"Fine," said Peach. "Be that way, bitch."

Tweed blushed, warm from the insult but also reacting to something else. There was something very wrong here, a thing more terrible for being undefined and out of reach.

An image of Dex waiting in the corridor came to her. She had to get back to him. She had to be sure he was all right.

Tweed stuffed her lipstick in her purse, then glanced over. Bowser McPhee, staring at her, was fingering the slut's lobebag, tugging it down, down, down, not intending to stop, not *being* stopped by his new lover. It slipped lower, then fell to the floor, sweet aroused girlflesh hanging there naked and exposed.

The sight thrilled Tweed.

She was dumbstruck, frozen where she stood, wanting to be with Dex right now, wanting just as much to stay and watch, maybe even partake in the events unfolding before her.

This is crazy, thought Tweed. This is way past crazy and I oughta move, go, get out.

Right now!

Dex stood there in the hallway spooked.

Why hadn't they headed for a more heavily trafficked area, instead of these out-of-the-way restrooms?

He could stand to go himself, but the frosted glass door with BOYS etched on it was dark and foreboding. He would have to snake a hand inside it to turn on the lights.

Why were the lights off anyway?

It was a trap. Gerber Waddell waited inside, knife dripping. If Dex held really still, he could probably hear drops of blood hitting the tile floor.

Besides, what if Tweed emerged, missed him, went off by herself to look for him? She would be attacked for sure, and Dex would live his life knowing that his negligence had led to her death.

No. He would wait here. His bladder could wait too. No matter that it was spooky here and there were far too many shadows oozing up out of the age-old grime where wall met floor. No matter that things gleamed in those shadows.

He had his moves down.

He just needed to be vigilant.

Ah but what if the mad janitor was in the girls' room right now, holding his hand over Tweed's mouth and readying his blade for her throat?

Dex felt like bursting in.

But no. No sound other than a flush came from inside. No scuffles. His ears were attuned to the slightest noise, even imagined ones.

I can't trust my senses, he thought.

But there's stuff you *know* your mind is making up, and there's no mistaking the real thing when it happens.

Yeah, but by then it'll be too late.

It's the girls' room, he kept telling himself. The girls' room.

No boys allowed.

Only pervies would be interested in sneaking in. And he was no pervy. Dexter Poindexter was a straight arrow, and always would be.

It was good to be a straight arrow in a world that was falling apart. His parents said so. They told him they were proud of him for it.

Just be on the alert, he thought. Be ready to fend off attack, darting out from any doorway or any secret snap-back-able portion of any wall. Steer clear of walls.

And try not to piss your goddamn pants.

Explain *that* to the tuxedo rental place.

He laughed. Here his life was in danger, and he was worried about being embarrassed in the face of some dumb-ass clerk.

Dex checked his watch.

What was taking her so long?

Something snapped in the distance. His ears went up. Was it close by? Had it come from the restroom?



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