

20. A White Knight Felled

Delia Gaskin slipped into her third janitor suit. There were two clean ones left, lying before her on a folding chair in the backways.

The thought of trying to tug a soiled pair of coveralls back on over her legs and up her torso appalled her. The stench of gore-soaked denim, the clammy feel of it as it slid over skin, nearly turned her stomach. At night's end, she would fling them all into the basement furnace. That would happen soon after Gerber Waddell had been thrust into the frenzied masses to be scapegoated and fattered.

Ahead of her hung two floating rectangles of light, innerlit jellyfish exhibits in a darkened aquarium. She recognized them as belonging to the ground floor restrooms in the school's northeast sector. Fluorescent light bled out of one-way mirrors above the restroom sinks, casting short swatches of light into back corridors, the wood here gone to mold, dust, and disrepair.

Each restroom was viewable from an alcove, a four-foot recess from the backways to the surface of the mirror. On Delia's first pass through this area, she had chanced upon a folding chair leaning against the alcove wall, CORUNDUM HIGH SCHOOL stenciled in white on the back.

Damned janitor had been a guilty little bugger after all, breaking legions of laws by being in the backways for other than upkeep (and precious little of *that* there had been), wanking off no doubt to flashes of girlflesh. Delia hadn't yet checked the showers in the girls' gym, but she was willing to bet that Gerber the perv had a peephole and a folding chair there as well.

She turned into the first alcove, hoping for victims. Bingo! Three of them. A girl and a guy going at it hot and heavy, right up against the sinks. And Tweed Megrim, pooching out her lips as she painted them.

Delia gripped the handle of her carving knife. This kill would be easy. A quick swing of the mirror panel and a lunge.

She told herself she ought to wrap things up soon. Have the janitor snuffed, comfort Brest and Trilby, free the rest.

But she liked setting the superior little snots a-scurrying.

She loved to terrify them, reducing smug instructors to fear and quivering, slashing the life out of yet another wretch and watching the river of panicked ants roil and boil and jump its banks, a seethe of insectual panic that empowered her after years of powerlessness and scorn.

She reached for the mirror's catch.

Behind her a voice spoke up.

Or rather it sang.



Delia nearly leaped back in fright. She bit down upon a scream. Blood pounded in her brain. As she turned, she had the wherewithal to conceal the carving knife at her side.

"Wait now," he sang, "just wait now."

There stood Matthew Megrin, history teacher and daddy to the bitch who'd been slated to die tonight. By chance, Delia had spared this man's daughter, though now she was preparing to strike the unlucky girl down in the restroom.

"Hello, Mr. Megrin," she said.

All the teachers used first names with each other and with the staff. But the staff, herself included, were expected to use titles when they addressed the faculty. It made her feel small. Tonight, she felt bigger.

Her greeting sounded a tad sardonic.

"A question," he sang. "I have a question."

Seniors loved this man, whose history lessons were always spontaneous and sung. To Delia, it seemed an affectation.

This sad sack's past had dealt him an unknown blow, one that drove him into this vocal refuge. His singing voice was smooth and beautiful. It would be a shame to silence it, but she clearly had no choice.

He was wary. Would he think she was the designated slasher? For an instant. Then he would realize that a mere nurse had no business in the backways.

In an instant he would run. Or more likely, he would stand and defend his little girl. Either way, she had to regain the advantage.

"Matthew," she said in sultry tones.

"What're you doing back here?" he sang, his notes and rich delivery starting to falter as he registered her words and her manner of speaking.

Her free left hand flew to her sexlobe and snatched off the bag. Her head tilted at a bold come-hither angle.

With thoughts of love did Delia light her eyes. But deep inside, an impulse traveled from head to hand. Her right arm rose, the steel blade as rigid as her guile was soft.

He saw it. Saw what she hid.

Observant bastard.

The teacher's resolve was swift. He tried to leap at her, to seize her attacking wrist.

But he bobbed. The forbidden sight of the nurse's sexlobe threw him.

It was enough. The honed blade sheared through his moving fingers, no stop, no averting as it swept up to cut where his shoulder met his neck.

They danced a brutal ballet.

His death leap threatened to hurl them both against the mirror. The kids, frightened off by the report, would slip out of her grasp.

She spun their axis about, even as she swept the knife across his throat. He pitched forward and she slithered behind him, gripping his hair, letting go the knife, and yanking him backward with all her might.

Matthew's neckslit grinned open.

But Delia had succeeded in slowing him to a dull soundless thud against the glass. A gush of blood sheened down his daughter's face as she put the finishing touches on her lips and headed past the necking couple.

A death wheeze bubbled from Matthew Megrim's throat: melodic, rhythmic, optimistic even in the grip of excruciating pain. The poor fuck had once more saved his child, who walked oblivious out of the girls' room, flouncing away from death for the second time this evening.

Delia let his corpse collapse and retrieved the knife from where it had fallen. Not sharp enough for the neckers.

She recovered her blue chiffon lobebag and slipped it back on. From the gym bag lying beside the folding chair she drew a thick rubber mallet. Hefted it. She would stun 'em and drag 'em off to the machine shop for fun and games.

No time to waste.

Kitty Buttweiler's memory demanded far more honoring. Love by death stolen away could never be regained. But by God, that love could be revered, and she was determined to revere it.

There was nothing like human skin split wide—down to muscle, organ, bone, and marrow—to rouse the blood and focus the attention.

Delia unlatched the mirror and swung it open.

The lust bunnies, Bowser and Peach, an odd pair, separated their kissy lips and arched back to check out the noise, the cool draft, the sudden disorientation.

Delia reached over the sink, a perfect swing to her arm, and smacked the bare-lobed slut first. The fallen Peach pinned her mate, which made it a breeze to lay open his forehead. He fell silent, inert, as she had done before him.

The girl first, then the boy, Delia drew up into the alcove beside the dead teacher. With wraps of twine, she secured their wrists behind their backs.

The going was rough, the way tight.

But foot by foot, Delia dragged them along the backways, fired by thoughts of the machine shop and its possibilities for mayhem.

The restroom door swung shut behind Tweed, a rush, then a catch, slowing a foot from closure.

Dex wasn't there.

Then he emerged from the shadows. She ran to him, let him gather her into a bear hug.

"I was afraid for you," he said.

"Me too, for you," she said. "It was awful."

From the restroom came a boy's voice, lonely, hurt, and anxious. His yelps of pleasure sounded like pain.

Dex tensed.

"It's only Bowser McPhee," said Tweed. "Him and Peach. They're going at it."

The high-pitched voice fell silent, falling off its odd orgasm. Tweed imagined white ribbons of sperm jetting across the red frills of Peach's dress. The image fascinated and revolted her.

She was glad to have resisted, glad to be in Dex's arms.

A group of promgoers swept past them.

In their midst moved the old chaperones with the notched jawflesh. Arm in arm they went, their eyes aglow with perverse delight. If you shut your eyes, you could smell wilted violets.

"Where to now?" Tweed asked.

He shrugged. "Back to the dance?"

She pictured the Ice Ghoul rising out of the darkness the gym had been plunged into. "No way. I bet he's there waiting for the first stragglers to wander in."

Dex snapped his fingers. "The band room."

Not more than an hour before, her biology teacher's spouse had been killed there. His blood would be lying in fresh pools on the planking, near where the French horns sat. Moreover, the room held fond memories of Mr. Jones.

Tweed didn't want to go there.

But how likely was it that the slasher would return to the site of a recent kill?

"Let's do it," she said, taking Dex's arm.

Against the counterclockwise flow they walked, pressed uncomfortably near the lockers. But the band room lay less than half a corridor away.

When they entered, fresh death-smell still befouled the air. The corpse, thank God, had been removed. No one else was there. The lampstand, bloodstained from the bludgeoning, gave off its feeble glow. Tall gray doors curved around the room, menacing and quiet.

"I don't think we should . . ."

"This is home," Dex said. "I say we take our chances here. Don't worry. I'll die before I let him hurt you or get near you."

Though Tweed had misgivings, she relented. "I feel safe with you." That was both true and untrue.

"Good, let's get comfortable."

In the obscure gloom, Dex removed his white tuxedo jacket, folded it, lining out, and draped it on the floor against the tall door which on a normal day held sax cases. He was gambling, and Tweed went along, that it didn't hold something else tonight.

Dexter Poindexter, risk taker.

She loved that about him.

She loved lots of things about him. Pulling herself over, she planted a kiss on his friendship lobe.

"What's that about?" he asked.

"It's about how I love you."

He smiled and gripped her hand where it rested on his arm. "I love you too," he said.

And he did.

Cries of pain interrupted Bray and Winnie's embrace there in the backways. It was unclear to either of them how far or from what direction the cries came.

A young male voice.

Two sharp grunts.

It raised Bray's hackles. Winnie's too, to judge from her reaction.

Bray had halted her onward hurtle, drawn her into his arms, felt her body melt against his, her mouth open to his lips.

Now the pitch of another victim's pain shot lightning bolts through her and split them apart.

"Come on," she said, pulling him along.

"Wait. Where?"

"I'm pretty sure it came from over there." She pressed forward again.

Winnie must have the night vision of a cat, thought Bray. Or my kisses have energized her.

She gripped his hand as the close warm air breezed past them. The walls swept by like batter made of rotting wood, curving out of the pitch black on either side, dim disconcerting rollers crashing without sound about them. An occasional nail snagged his suit.

The bulbs were burnt out in this section of the backways, but that didn't stop Winnie. It felt to Bray like an endless roil of dreamtime. He had to remind himself that a knife-wielding maniac might leap out at them from anywhere at any time.

"Are you sure you're—"

"Quiet," she shot back.

In their first moments behind the scenes, Winnie had spoken of trusting to instinct. Now she had clearly slipped into that mode.

Shifts in temperature and air currents and an impression of black-on-black crossings signaled intersections. Winnie barreled through them, taking her and Bray left or right without a moment's hesitation.

Abruptly she slowed, stopped. "That's the place. I'm sure of it." She raised her arm and pointed.

Two boxes of light floated ahead, canted at a peculiar angle. Bray felt imbalanced in their presence. They hovered there like pointillist paintings stippled in gradations of gray, a sense of menace emanating from them.

"Careful now," said Bray, tensing to grapple with their killer friend.

To the right of each box was a recess, the place from which the light was coming. Bray imagined a figure crouched to spring. Winnie wouldn't have a chance.

"Let me by," he said.

He gripped her, turned her, maneuvering past her. Do it, he thought, don't let fear creep in. He raised his hands defensively as he walked into the light and turned toward the recess.

Nothing.

No . . . but . . .tricked!

The slasher was there below, ready to spring. Bray's skin flushed with quick sweeps of heat. His eyes were still adjusting. The slasher charging at him had the advantage.

A knife lunged from the darkness.

Nothing.

No movement at all. No slasher. No knife.

Winnie came up to him. She peered down, then averted her eyes. "Christ," she said.

Crouching closer, he saw what Winnie had seen. Another victim, some old guy, a teacher type, someone he'd never seen. The angle the man's head lay at made no sense.

Then Bray saw that his neck had been brutally sliced open. There was blood everywhere. A crude parabola of gore coated one segment of the glass, a window onto an empty restroom.

I'm not seeing this, he told himself.

"Bray?" Winnie's throat was flayed raw.

He rose, the shock flooding him.

He wanted someone, anyone, to comfort him. Winnie. She would do. Her arms came about him, and he realized *she* was seeking comfort from *him*.

Frantically, they embraced, grappling for elusive assurance, finding it and craving more.

Dumb, he thought.

He and Winnie had laid themselves wide open for attack.

They would die here. At any moment the mad slasher would leap out and cut them to ribbons. But even as he let his mind career about in panic, Bray held Winnie in a numb, shocked embrace, his body as calm as a grave.

Deadened. Dead. One way or another, they were as good as dead already. They would become victims. Or they would be accused and convicted of tonight's killings.

The cards were stacked against them.

Winnie tensed. A soft cry issued from her. Her head lifted as she seemed to sniff something new and terrible, a sharp miasma of misery on the cloying air.

"What?" Bray thought he said.

But Winnie's head was angled back, frozen in attentiveness like the snapshot of a mustang, its mane tossed about, its nostrils flaring wide from the scent of a predator on the wind.



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