

## 21. Aerated and Tumbled Dry

Two things awakened Peach.

A warm slap of fluid across her cheeks.

And Bowser's screams.

Aches sang all over her body. Her knees and elbows, her thighs and back, her now-unshod feet, and every part of her head. All of it felt as if she had been drubbed unmercifully. Her hands lay like two comatose crabs, trapped and numb beneath the weight of her torso.

Peach opened her eyes, one puffy eyelid like a nagging fear in her peripheral vision. Shiny snips of tin, like crimped moons, lay scattered about a blunt iron base. Washes of blood coated the dull gray metal.

A low ominous hum came from above.

The machine shop. Elwood Dunsmore's preserve, where humiliation of the inept held sway. Peach hated it.

Fluid splattered her face like gobs of hawked spit. Some of it landed on her lips and splashed into her mouth, salty and rude.

Bowser's screams redoubled.

Peach looked up.

Like a piston frozen in an upthrust position, a silver square plattered Bowser above the blunt iron base. His head hung down, bent back at the neck, hair askew. His shoulders angled awkwardly as he lay upon his bound hands, the white coat of his tux scored and scuffed with dirt.

Off the other side of the square, his legs hung dumbly asplay, the bottoms of his trousers puffed up like wads of bloody gauze, dripping, drinking, o'erspilling.

Peach saw janitor overalls rising from odd shoes, powder blue and dressy. A woman's hand grasped a red knob in a cross of knobs and eased it down.

Nurse Gaskin!

How could it be Nurse Gaskin?

Her eyes were taut, intense, narrowed to an insane point.

Again the hidden drill bit into Peach's new boyfriend, a spew of screamed denial issuing from his lips. Blood shot out from above, swatted her brow, forced her eyelids shut.



She opened them, the sting of blood prompting tears. Wimpy old nurse lady, mateless, over the hill. When they had spoken of her at all, it had been with sneers or innuendo. Now she'd gone over the edge.

A skilled hand reversed the cross of knobs, dropped to tug Bowser a few inches farther on, then found again a red knob. She was punching buttonholes deep into Bowser's body, working her way toward his head as if she were making a human cribbage board.

And Peach was next.

She wanted to cry out, to scream for help.

But all sound had drained from her. Her body, an empty gourd, shook and shivered. Like a sudden blush below, her bladder released. The warmth became clammy and chill. The odor of undiluted urine invaded her nostrils.

Above, a new gush of blood fountained. A spurt of Bowser's heartpump rained again across Peach's face.

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Bray felt like a mule tugged along by some crazed prospector, as twists and turns of backway were carved out of nothingness by the womanshape that impelled him on.

Winnie's instincts were up.

Since they'd left the restroom victim, Bray had lost his sense of direction. For all he knew, they had reached China.

Winnie's step did not falter.

"Are we getting closer?" he called out.

Her hand raised to wave him silent. Then he abruptly ran into her halted body. He clutched her as if he had meant to.

"Oaf," she said. "Listen."

Bray couldn't hear anything but his own heart and the settling of ancient dust. Then he made it out: The faint whine of a buzzsaw, a gnat at his left ear.

Winnie said, "This way," and again they were off, like Alice and the Red Queen trying furiously to stay in place.

He concentrated on staying near the receding rustle of Winnie's dress. His eyes struggled to keep it in view.

Oddly, there in the oppressive confines of the backways they swept through, Bray's thoughts turned less to the danger they were in and the corpses they had seen, than to Jonquil Brindisi.

It was almost as if the obscure grayness in front of them were a moving projection screen.

Upon it he saw the thick-lipped looker, the flaming redheaded instructress of the greater vices, sizing him up, sizing them *both* up, from their first meeting.

There she stood at the mike, keeping the kids from panicking. Her strength thrilled him, turned him on, setting off flares of worry at the thought of her accusatory finger suddenly pointed in their direction.

Generous breasts, earlobes to die for, a hot steely look in her eyes: He craved it all, the promise, speaking perhaps only in his mind, that this woman would be the perfect complement to his and Winnie's love.

They stopped again.

The whine was louder.

Winnie's mouth touched his ear. "We've got him!" The triumph, the high flush of arousal in her voice thrilled him. Then she took off again, hurtling faster, a great bird of prey swooping down the obscure passageway, drawing him along in her wake.

He loved Winnie. He loved her determination, her naivete, her shape and smell, the totality of her. If they survived this night, their life together would be glorious.

Another halt. This time, he nearly knocked her off her feet.

The high whine came louder still, edged this time with a scream, a piercing girl-sound. Then that was choked off and the whine ceased.

Dead silence descended upon the backways.

Winnie swore.

"We've lost him," said Bray.

"Not yet," she shot back, nearly sniffing the air to find their killer. "We're almost on him."

"He's gone."

She thrust her face into his. "Look, there's no time for your bullshit, okay?"

No recrimination in her words. Just love and a forgiving, a statement of fact, a simple urging to follow her as she turned and flew off once more on sheer hunch.

Seconds later, an eternity later, Bray saw a flash over Winnie's right shoulder.

It fluttered. A distant figure came through a panel. A moving smudge. He was headed straight for them! Then clearly no.

The closing panel sheered away the light and Bray saw the figure recede, something swinging from its right hand.

"Wait! Hey you! Stop!" Winnie shouted.

After the briefest of pauses—would he kill them?—the flat sound of running echoed along the backways. Their savior had no interest in chatting. Nor it seemed in confrontation. Not now, at any rate, while he and Winnie had the upper hand.

Bray saw a sickly white 654 above the panel as they passed it. "Shouldn't we—" he began, but Winnie flew on, then jerked to a halt.

A muffled thud. No running sounds.

Another panel had shut.

They were alone in the backways.

He felt Winnie deflate. "He's escaped."

"No, he hasn't," protested Bray. "We can still catch him." His body was suddenly in overdrive, straining to go on. "How many panels can there be up ahead?"

"I *had* the bastard." She made a gesture, an expression of despair, her certainty gone. "Now he's vanished."

"Yeah but couldn't we—"

"It'd be a waste of time. I'll bet he wants us to do that. Then, while we're mucking about looking for him, he'll kill again. A few more victims."

"Speaking of victims . . . ."

"Yes," said Winnie. "Let's. He may have left a clue to his identity."

They doubled back and found 654 again.

Bray found the catch and released it.

And the abattoir that had been a machine shop opened its vile red stench to them, an outrageous glimpse into hell.

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In the school's basement where they had gone to ground, Kyla looked upon the antics of Patrice and Fido with sheer disgust.

She could understand giddy. Hysterical was even in her purview. But throwing caution to the wind, acting like puppystruck schoolkids, shouting juvenile defiance at the walls? It drained the love right out of her, new as well as old.

For years, Patrice had felt like part of her, a hairy wen one accepted and even grew perversely fond of. It stunned Kyla how fleeting eternal love could be, how in one instant over something that seemed trivial, it could crumble, leaving you alone again in the ashes of solitude.

She was sitting crosslegged against a cheaply paneled wall. But the wall felt solid. You could sense—*she* could anyway—whether or not a wall was hollow. This one had no boobytrap, nothing to give the slasher an advantage.

Out on the concrete floor, Fido brandished his cleavers, Patrice her knives. They circled one another at a safe distance: Jack Spratt sparring with his wife.

"Quiet, you two," said Kyla.

Again they ignored her.

Giggles.

High-pitched come-out-come-out-whenever-you-are's.

Safe feints at mutual mayhem.

By God, Kyla wanted to slaughter them both. Impulse twitched in her hands, there where she clutched her own cutting tools.

All part of this evening's madness, she thought. It would be easy to best them, to put her past behind her, to blame two more deaths on the janitor—who was fattermeat, surely, as soon as he showed his face.

"Me 'n' Patrice are ready for you!" crowed Fido.

His skin, whose touch for the longest time she and Patrice had craved, seemed loathsome to her now. She despised as well the visual blot of his friendship lobe, an odd bit of flesh that last night she had dreamt of kissing.

Patrice's knives danced like daggers of rain in the harsh light, a safe distance from Fido's.

Few kids knew the school *had* a basement, let alone how to reach it. Fido had hit upon the idea of hiding here. He had convinced them it would be a swell idea, the slasher concentrating on the upper floors for his victims. Now Kyla had her doubts.

Their new beau was too damned cocksure.

Patrice had soaked up his confidence, going giddy in the head, her chubby figure twirling like a hippo in heat.

The gargantuan furnace hummed low and ominous, a row of double bass players bowing hushed subliminal tones from their instruments. Angled pipes rose and fell like thick strands of dark spaghetti, their shadows and smudges hiding just about anything, *anyone*, Kyla's imagination could conjure.

Beyond the mad dance of her companions, a laundry chute curved down. Its indistinct length faced her squarely.

There was something dark and nasty, something threatening, about it. It hung there like a big gaping elephant's trunk, the light of a lone bulb throwing shadows into it that glinted, suggesting moisture where dryness surely prevailed.

It reminded Kyla of her fluxidermed granny, her vulval opening as big and blaring as a tuba mouthpiece. Daddy had kept his dead mother in his bedroom closet. He hadn't bothered to have his fathers fluxed, which made him an oddity among grown-ups, Kyla had later realized. One parent only had been fluxidermed.

Nor did he display it in the vestibule, as normal grown-ups did. When Kyla came home before her father, she would go into his dark bedroom and peer into the closet, past forests of hanging suits and shirts, at the bare buttocks of her grandmother. From that dusty dark ruddy pucker had her daddy dropped, a dark ominous ancestral privacy. That's what this gaping laundry chute reminded

her of, as the huge furnace rumbled in Kyla's gut and Fido and Patrice flurried knives at one another.

An ancient laundry basket on wheels, its canvas sides bulging with huge mounds of soiled towels and sheets, awaited the laundry chute's next disgorging.

"Will you two shut the fuck *up*?"

She said it loud if laconically, knowing they would blow her off. But some things just got said cuz they needed saying. Maybe a failed warning would be sufficient to ward off the killer.

Maybe not.

Probably not.

Then something clanged overhead.

It put a halt to her companions' silly little dance of death. It raised the hairs on the back of Kyla's neck, blasting prickly heat straight up into her backbrain.

"What was that?" Patrice wondered aloud.

A rumble began like distant muffled timpani, as the clang reversed itself. Some sliding door wrenched up, then juddered decisively shut, almost the confident slice of a guillotine blade falling home into its groove.

The rumble bumbled about above, growing louder, the beat of it coming faster and more violent.

Kyla couldn't fix on it. Then her ears peeled the sound from its echo. She focused on the dark dropdown that gaped before her.

Fido and Patrice gazed about wildly. A brandish of knives angled out to ward off any attacker.

Before Kyla could warn them, even as words took shape in her confused brain, she saw the thing tumble into view, a dark furball in the darkness, coming quick, separating itself from the chute and leaping free.

Was it a huge black spider rolled into a ball, ready to spear out its legs and scuttle murderously toward them, stinger out, its dark dangle of limbs silently going *dandle-dandle-dandle*?

The thing bounced once on the heaped laundry, leaving a blotch of gore across the white expanse. Then it smacked the concrete by Fido's feet. The crack of a bat upon a skull. Splintered bone. It rolled furiously, *flop-flop* it rolled *flop-flop*, hair-face-hair-face.

Bowser McPhee, Fido's ex-boyfriend.

His skin was gray verging on blue, bruised, upsplashed with blood to the jowls.

The neck had been sheered through in one clean sharp slice.

Kyla wondered why Fido's screams sounded so high. Then she realized all three of them had merged their screams, a braid of terror tightly stranded together.

She froze. The head before her, with its baleful blinkless stare, held her in thrall.

If the killer happened to appear now, Kyla realized, she would be as helpless and doomed as a deer startled into dumbness on a dark highway, creamed by the rig that pinned it to the night with its high beams.



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