

## 22. A Proliferation of Deaths

Dex and Tweed huddled together on the band room floor against a ten-foot-tall gray-painted door. A fan of such doors swept off in either direction. Theirs housed sax cases, the others timpani, trombones, tubas, every band member's weapon of choice.

They couldn't be sure, of course, that the storage space behind one of those doors hadn't been emptied out before anyone arrived, an easy point of access for the killer.

One level down, the lone dim bulb atop its stand feeble light into the room. At its base was a dried pool of blood, hastily mopped, from the death of Bix Donner, the husband of Tweed's tenth grade bio teacher.

Dex had thought the rogue slasher would not return to the scene of his crime.

He wasn't so sure any more.

The crazy bastard's preternatural vision, Dex was starting to fear, had them in his sights. The slow cold hand of paranoia slid its fingers along his spine and dug its nails into his brain.

Yet perhaps the cause of his rising panic was not paranoia at all, but survival instinct.

"Poor Mr. Donner," Tweed whispered, breaking the silence like a shout.

Dex raised a finger to his lips. At her ear: "Keep an eye out. He could rush us from anywhere. If you even *think* a shadow moved, let me know. Don't assume you're imagining it, okay?"

Tweed nodded.

She mouthed something soundless. Dex thought it was "I love you," though the weak light made it impossible to be sure.

The bulb flickered as if a moth flitted back and forth over it. Then it went out. Blackness rushed in to surround them.

One squat upper window glowed with enfeebled moonlight that shot down head-high to carve a far sliver out of one wall.

We're sitting ducks, thought Dex, we've got to get away from these doors.

He took Tweed's hand and helped her up, the rustle of her dress concealing perhaps the groan of a tall gray door's hinges.

Dex felt a breeze. The passing of someone's body before them? At any moment, Tweed would cry out from a lethal wound. Or a knife blade would violate him, pricking out the heart of his life.



"Hold me," said Tweed.

Dex gave her a quick fierce hug, then said, "Come on."

Holding Tweed's hand, Dex slid his right shoe along the platform. He was no longer certain of the four-inch drop to the next level, where the trumpets and French horns sat.

It wouldn't do to trip and tumble. They'd be dead in an instant.

Tweed said, "Not so fast!" Panic at being dragged along in the darkness. She bumped him, then regained her balance.

"Another level now, watch your step," he said. "Clarinet section. Okay, we're off the risers. Past the piano. I can make out the band room door, coming up on the blackboard now."

He felt along it. Soon the door.

The killer's eyes burrowed into their backs. He would never let them escape.

But what if he were right *outside* the door, waiting for them in the hallway?

Tweed tugged him to a halt. "Dex, I heard something. Out there."

And the band room door opened, gray on black. A figure slipped through. The door hissed closed behind it. Dex rushed whoever it was, grappling with the shape, his fists darting out, trying to stun their attacker, to get the upper hand.

No resistance. A woman's voice shouted out, "Hey, wait . . . what—?"

"Miss Phipps!" said Tweed.

Adora Phipps, Dex thought. She's safe. But he felt down her wrists just in case.

Empty hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's us. Me and Tweed. We thought you were—"

"I'm not. But I'll be damned if I know who is. Listen we're trying to round everyone up, get them back to the gym. It's the safest place, and Mr. Buttweiler's got a plan. Come with?"

Dex nodded.

"You bet," said Tweed relieved.

"Ditto," said Dex, realizing his nod had failed to register.

"Good, let's go."

After groping about for it, the door made a vertical gray line. Then that line gaped into a rectangle wide enough for them to pass through one at a time.

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Jonquil Brindisi walked as if she had been thoroughly oiled, her lubricious limbs animated by sheer desire. She loved the mayhem, the chaos, loved them to distraction.

Once Gerber Waddell was found, she would join in the fluttering. But if *she* found him first, she planned to fuck the simple dweeb, feeling his lovely violence invade her as she tied him down and rode him.

Just imagining it made her gasp.

She had already dragged Claude into a supply closet after Elwood Dunsmore had been found torch-faced by the entranceway and Futzzy'd rolled in the mutilated zippermouths. Claude kept up his but-I'm-married routine until she yanked his fly open and filled her throat close to choking.

Then his pretzel of words, the syntactically convoluted bullshit he had made a part of himself, turned into barnyard grunts and oh-yeahs and suck-me-darlin's. She had left him panting, his organ still thick despite its hot spew. He tasted like pea soup pureed with pearl onions.

Thus, Jonquil had mused, do the greater vices ever overwhelm the lesser.

Now she was on Gerber's trail.

More precisely, she was up for whatever the fates delivered. She *craved* the killer. And she felt that the strength of her craving ought to be enough to draw him out.

Until now, Gerber had been a sexless dolt of muscles and nods, thinning hair and stupid grins. Who would ever have guessed at the dynamo of hatred which had clearly simmered inside him for years, exploding at last into this amazing orgy of bloodletting?

Swimming upstream of the fleeing students, Jonquil had heard talk of terrible screams and the whining of buzzsaws. Up ahead, she saw the closed classroom door.

No noise came from the machine shop. But a bright light inside cut through wires of opaque glass in the lower half of the door, throwing sprays of dark diamonds across the corridor.

Something had gone on here. She sensed it. Perhaps her demented janitor awaited her, crouched to kill but ready for seduction if she played him right.

Jonquil grasped the doorknob and moved boldly inside, into the full light of the shop. Bulks of machinery stood gleaming and silent everywhere.

Tensed to repel attack, she took in Brayton and Raven standing by the far wall. Their soiled prom clothes had been torn. Their faces were forlorn and bereft, their eyes unable to stray from what they beheld.

Then she strode toward them. A large lathe moved out of her way, and there before her—wafts of deathstench turning the air moist and oozy and charged with sexual energy—were a pair of mauled, mutilated kids.

An unidentifiable male, headless, lay akimbo upon the tile floor. His off-white tuxedo was as pinkish red as bleeding gums. His chest looked as if it had, from neck to navel, once sprouted teeth, all of them yanked out now. Gaping holes pooled there, crimson fleshcups that made Jonquil swoon.

But it was the female that truly got Jonquil off, what with its slutty red-frilled frock and the sizzling-as-hot-blacktop body, no mistaking it, of Peach Popkin, whose face alone would have made identification problematic.

The Popkin girl had been caught in a swan dive, her arms extended, her bare back arched up into a U upon the platform that housed the table saw. Her breasts met the table's smooth surface at nipplepoint, their tips pushed flat beneath her blanched aureoles.

Beyond the blade, the girl's strawberry blond hair, streaked a deep red, wisped forward. Her coiffure had been mussed from the killer's having pressed her forehead forward into the gray blur of a spinning blade.

At rest now, the blade stuck deep, through skin and skullbone, parting the halves of her brain. Though sprays of gore had spattered her flesh, most of it had shot across the room like spoutings from a dying whale's blowhole.

The scene was breathtaking.

"We can explain," came Brayton's voice, a warmth to it that moistened Jonquil further.

"Oh no you can't," she said, not accusing but filled with the wonder she felt.

"We were in the backways," said Raven. "We saw the killer come out of here. He had the boy's head by the hair. He got away."

"Marvelous," said Jonquil. The woman before her was one succulent saucy wench. Then it struck her. "How did you break into the backways? Only the slasher's supposed to know the combination, him and the janitor."

"Should we tell her?" Brayton asked.

Raven made a face. "What choice?"

He shrugged. "Zane Fronemeyer was chosen to be your school's slasher. He's dead. The janitor axed him in his basement. Fronemeyer's wives are dead too."

Jonquil shuddered. "Zane was a scumsucking zit from the word go. He wanted to suck *my* scum. He kept nagging, long after I made it clear he was less than zero in my book. Camille and Hedda deserved better. But the question remains: How do you two know all this?"

Brayton tried to speak, then gave up.

"Let's show her," his date said. She raised her hand to her left ear.

Brayton did likewise.

Christ! In the presence of death, these two sexy people, thought Jonquil, are about to expose their sexlobes to me. They're as turned on by all this as *I* am.

Ripples of come-need treadled through her loins. The right word, the right look, would set her off without a touch.

Their lobebags fell away.

And there, in all their glory . . . .

But Raven's exposed lobe was dyed a godawful green, some ridiculous protest among the homeless-by-choice. And Brayton yanked and peeled and his sexlobe, his friendship lobe too, came away in his hands like some spent Cyrano's nose putty.

The crude puckers of flesh which punctuated the question marks of his ears meant but one thing.

"You and Raven . . . you're—"

He nodded.

"My name's Winnie," the woman said.

"They took us off the streets, drugged us, delivered us to Fronemeyer. But Gerber Waddell killed him before he could kill us."

This changed everything.

A couple of freaks.

From the look of his severed lobes, Brayton was a promjumper. No way would Jonquil deign to suck on the vestigial stump of anyone's sexlobe, least of all some joker who had dodged his prom. Why, blowing a fucking eunuch would be about as frustrating and far more humiliating.

Jonquil sublimated her lust and grew cool.

"You've got no business being here," she said. "I ought to have you, I *will* have you arrested."

Brayton raised his hands. "Hey now—"

"We're your best chance of catching the killer. You need access to the backways, and we've got it."

The feisty little slut was right.

Jonquil still had the hots for Gerber Waddell. If she expected to fuck him before he was fattered, that could only happen by playing along with these two.

She deflated and stood down. "I give," she said. "The backways it is. Let's find him."

"This way," said Brayton, putting his lobebag back on. He punched a tiny keypad over the panel they stood before.

Winnie entered first, a soiled doll returned to the dingy package it had arrived in.

Jonquil went next, loving all over again the musk Brayton wore as she passed him and regretting what she'd learned about him. He'd have made an irresistible bedmate.

Brayton trailed after her.

The panel slid shut as the musty backways swallowed them up. Fired up at the prospect of finding the janitor, Jonquil moved between the homeless pair as though she were a convict and they her jailers.

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Sandy glanced about nervously.

The larger stairwells, wide and step-scuffed at the four corners of the school, always teemed with students between classes.

But halfway along the east, north, and west sides of the school were less-frequented stairs, shut off at top and bottom by steel safety doors. The lights burned harsh here, throwing hard-edged shadows across pink-tiled walls.

The stairwell, which stank of Lysol, was a place of loneliness and crushed cigarette butts.

Rocky was squatting against one wall.

Beside him stood Cobra, his knee bent and one cleated heel stuck to the wall like a magnet. His back bent, he puffed on a coffin nail.

Sandy feared the lulls, those times when the three of them were here alone. Rushes of kids would come by from above and below, the bars of the steel doors clanging and releasing, latches raucously catching as they swung shut. Then for a time, no one. Ominous stillness. All a-fidget, she would long for the next wave of promgoers, her friends, Rocky's friends.

Or total geeks, it didn't matter.

*Anyone* to suggest safety in numbers.

They had hit another lull.

"Let's go some place else," she said.

Rocky, on automatic, began to rise.

Cobra's free hand restrained him. "Stay put. Don't get me wrong. I like Sandy's sweet ass and I'm planning on having plenty of stiff-poled fun licking her lobes and knockers. But *I'm* calling the shots now. I say we hang here."

The door opened below. Then it swung shut. Faster than usual, Sandy thought.

From the landing, only part of the upper door was visible.

A snapping, like the quick sharp shake of a chain, sounded below. The door rattled as if the person who had come through it were trying to open it again.

Then a woman dressed in blue appeared, her short hair in mid-shake as she—Sandy recognized Nurse Gaskin—bounded up the stairs, clutching a large brown folder, the kind with accordion pockets like a briefcase. Bloodstains dappled her dress, reminders of her having witnessed the death of Mrs. Donner's husband in the band room.

The nurse glanced at them as she sped past, her face full of frowns like grown-ups often got, her fists clenched into tight balls.

She wanted to say something as she went by, but she held back until she was almost at the top. Then: "The bastard locked the door behind me."

Sandy didn't need to ask who she meant.

None of them did.

They glanced at one another, then moved as one in sheer terror. Sandy's head surged with hot flushes of panic.

Gripping the gray railing, she followed Cobra and Rocky, gearing that the janitor would somehow magically rise about them, bursting out of one of the panels fitted into the tile walls. Her flats pounded up the steps. A gray wad of gum lay like squashed putty on the edge of one step.

As Nurse Gaskin shot her hand to the door, Sandy heard another sharp snap, twin to the one below.

Did the sound come before, at, or after the nurse touched the door? It was too confusing to tell. It must have been just before.

Ms. Gaskin's hand pulled back from the door as if from a jolt of electricity. She jammed the folder under one arm and hit the bar, full force, with both hands, leaning into it.

The door refused to budge.

Sandy and her men had nearly reached the top platform.

Her mind raced.

They would die here. At any moment, darkness would come crashing down upon them. Hands would shoot out in a quick grasp at her ankles, yanking her off her feet.

No! They would shove the door open, the four of them exerting maximum effort to gain freedom.

But what lay in wait for them when the door flew open?

The nurse turned to them. She glanced with sudden alarm over Rocky's shoulder. He had one foot on the top step and began to look backward.

Sandy was spooked to the max.

She felt the janitor behind her, ready to grab them, skewer them. He was ready to unleash another outbreak of bloodletting.

Then the nurse's face bloomed with hatred.

She slammed full-force into Rocky, upsetting his balance, sending him flailing off the step.

Then she grabbed Cobra by the hair, yanking him across eight feet of ineffective arm-waving, head-first into the tile wall.

"Whoa," he had said, "wait a—"

But the headslam cut off his rising protest, and the nurse repeated that headslam as if she had been possessed by a mad plan to butt their way to freedom. A bullseye reddened on the tile wall.

Down below, Rocky landed badly, crying out in pain and disbelief as his body struck stairs and railings, meat and bone out of control.

Sandy froze, unable to move or think.

This wasn't happening.

The nurse was kind and meek and dorky. It was *Gerber Waddell* they had to look out for.

But kindly Nurse Gaskin released Cobra with an upward flurry of hands and bent for the brown folder.

Rocky was crawling painfully up the steps toward them, his legs weirdly skewed, his right temple smeared with blood.

Cobra fell, no sound from his mouth, just a resounding smack as his skull struck the floor.

"Don't," Sandy whimpered or thought she did.

The brown folder tumbled end over end like a flipped playing card, and in the nurse's hand was a ball peen hammer. As she passed, she threw Sandy a look of contempt that pinned her to the wall like a moth to cardboard.

Sandy trembled. She was unable to summon the will to cry out or stop the attack on Rocky.

The nurse's arm swung up.

It swung down.

And Sandy watched the hammer crack open a crater in her boyfriend's skull, staving it in like the thin hollow shell of a chocolate bunny. His body shook with the viciousness of each blow. Sandy couldn't look away, no matter how much she wanted to.

Rocky's cries stopped.

He became a big bloody ragdoll.

Only the nurse's savage grunts remained, a counterpart to her swung thunks into red flesh. Above those sounds sailed the wisps of Sandy's whimpering.

At last, the nurse turned away from Rocky and fixed Sandy in her stare. She rose up the steps toward her. Sandy's legs gave out and she slid down the wall.

Tears blurred her vision.

She was falling and the monster was rising.

"Three's a charm," said Nurse Gaskin, low, heavy, and harsh.

She crouched before the girl.

Cold wet metal touched her brow. A tickle slanted across it, a cool drop of blood.

The hammerhead lifted.

Another diagonal, crosswise to the first, traveled Sandy's forehead.

"Don't," she whimpered.

"Hold still now." Ms. Gaskin gripped Sandy's ponytail and wrenched it tight. "This will only hurt for a second."

The blur pulled back and then the punch came swiftly in, leaping beyond all bound, violating Sandy, opening her up.

The stairwell vanished and a rush of stars rode in on a black wave of night.



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