

23. True to Their School

Despite the chaos that had befallen Corundum High, and faced with mounting reports of fresh victims, Futzy Buttweiler had never felt so much in command.

Some enterprising jock had brought several dozen small flashlights from one of the science labs. Their beams now angled crazily across the gym. They had ended up primarily in the hands of natural-born leader types, but other kids held them too, infiltrating the privileged few around the bandstand.

Beyond the people Futzy addressed, the Ice Ghoul loomed out of the darkness. But the papier-mache monster didn't cow him any longer. Neither did it bring forth memories of Kitty's death and fluttering.

Tonight, Futzy would strike back.

He would triumph over the Ice Ghoul.

Before the night was out, he would see that Gerber Waddell was tracked down and torn apart.

Adora Phipps hugged him.

There would be no more bullshit in his life. He loved this woman. Why should he hide it? He wanted every godforsaken soul in the *world* to know that Futzy Buttweiler loved Adora Phipps.

He returned her hug. Then he spoke to the crowd massed before him.

There stood the Borgstroms, their eagerness to savage some deserving bastard, *any* deserving bastard, shining out even in darkness.

Beside the Borgstroms were Dexter Poindexter and Tweed Megrim, the night's intended victims who had by some strange chance escaped their fate and were now willing, brave souls, to tempt it again.

And, for all Futzy knew to the contrary, beyond their narrow perimeter of flitting torches, sick dimwitted Gerber Waddell himself lent an ear, knife in hand, ready to rush them at any moment.

Futzy kept his voice low, both to draw close their conspiratorial circle and to shut out the janitor, if indeed he were listening in.

"We're in the midst of a grave crisis, my friends," he began.

"Hey, Futzy," one of the newer teachers piped up. "Cut the crap, will you? There's no time for it."

That stung.

Futzy felt tempted to sting back.



Then he admitted to the merits of the remark, simplified, clarified, and began anew.

"I suggest," he said, "that we stay in pairs, divvy up the school, and move out, one flashlight to a pair. Everyone is to be armed. Adora and I have gathered some cutlery." He gestured to a pile of knives at his feet. "Take a couple. If you find the janitor, strike first and save your questions for later. Don't be jittery and don't go off half-cocked. Be *fully* cocked and ready for anything."

"What about the students?" asked Claude.

It struck Futzy for the first time: Jonquil Brindisi, who usually cleaved to Claude at these affairs, was nowhere to be seen. He prayed she hadn't come to a bad end. He would miss her spice and spirit.

Nurse Gaskin was absent as well, she who had witnessed the death of Bix Donner and been unable to stop it. Futzy hoped the poor woman wouldn't be permanently scarred by that experience.

"The students," said Futzy. "An excellent point, Claude. As you comb your portion of the school, gather them up, keep them close about you. And shout out to Gerber to give himself up. Offer him clemency, leniency, anything to lure him out of the backways. Our kids are smart. They'll go along to save their necks. But Gerber, despite the cunning he seems to have displayed tonight, is still at heart a simple-minded feeb. He'll buy into the big lie. Then we'll savage him."

It was tempting to speak up, but Futzy kept his remarks close to the chest. The Ice Ghoul seemed to strain forward to hear, struggling to split itself off from the darkness, rise to its full height, crane its bull neck, lumber forward, and kill them all.

A crazy notion came over the principal: He fancied that the janitor had squeezed up into the Ice Ghoul's hollowed-out head, directional mikes in its ears, and heard his entire plan.

Futzy dismissed that as paranoia.

Directly before him, hand in hand, stood Dex and Tweed. Adora, finding them hunkered down in the band room, had persuaded them to come along to the gym.

She gave Futzy's arm a squeeze.

It was time.

"Mr. and Mrs. Borgstrom, you two explore the butchery wing. Claude, I want you and . . . and Brest—Trilby, you stay here with Pill—to scour the science labs. Dexter and Tweed, you've got the stairwells."

Futzy's inner map of Corundum High flashed by as he doled out sector after sector. He didn't want any place overlooked. To himself and Adora, he assigned the band room.

"Take time to do it right," he said. "Don't skimp, don't shortchange. When you're finished, bring yourselves and any kids you've rounded up to the auditorium. If you find Gerber Waddell, send runners there.

"And good luck to you all."

Crowding forward, their flashlights crazily stabbing downward, they delved into the cutlery, as somber a group as Futzy had ever seen. He was reminded of the solemn clatter of communion trays passed hand to hand, tiny glasses of grape juice lifted out with a clink.

Adora squeezed his hand and brought it to her lips. "Good plan, darling."

"We'll get him," he assured her.

"I love you, Futzy," said Adora, her eyes beaming with pride.

"And I love you, dear lady."

Futzy felt no cause for confidence.

Yet oddly enough he was confident.

He looked forward to tossing Trusk and Torment out of his life for good—they would be amazed at the new vigor in him as he threw their sorry asses off the front porch—and installing Adora Phipps there instead.

She would glow.

So would he.

And Kitty, at last, would be laid to rest.

But first—Futzy stooped and grabbed a shish kabob skewer to complement his snubnose—they had a rogue janitor to subdue.

Trilby sat in a folding chair behind the refreshments. Pill lay slumped on her lap, a thumb stuck deep in her mouth.

Stroking her daughter's hair, Trilby made soothing sounds and gently rocked her.

Above them, among the rafters, floated the dim shape of a basketball hoop and backboard that had been cranked up and away. From the ill-lit expanse before them rose the Ice Ghoul, the lines of its frame harsh and cutting, its face obscured by shadow.

But Trilby was unafraid.

A madman had murdered her husband, spooked her little girl, and thrown her household into chaos. Yet she feared neither for her life nor for Pill's.

They would survive and grow strong.

Before Brest left with Claude Versailles to check out the science labs, she had hugged Trilby and Pill. "Sit tight," she had said. "We'll be back soon." But as she said it, she had worn her stone face, tight and drawn, her eyes clamped down upon her feelings. There was no telling how tonight's mayhem had affected her, nor how it had affected their future.

Don't think about it.

Pay attention to Pill.

Pill had witnessed a murder, under threat of discovery and slaughter herself. She had heard her father's death announced before a frightened crowd of promgoers.

"There, there," she said. "That's my Pill." Her hand stroked the angel-smooth hair above her daughter's neck. Tonight's terrors might cause Pill to develop too early her lust for blood.

Or she might never do so.

Trilby didn't know which would be worse.

No, that wasn't so.

If Pill were inadequately socialized, she would be treated as an odd duck, open to taunts and jeers and the most hurtful kind of bullying.

Worse, she might join the anti's.

Pill had a fiercely independent streak. If she were permanently damaged over this—and the magnitude of tonight's trauma threatened to make that a certainty—she might join the crazies who, as they claimed, used violence to *end* violence. Eventually, she would be taken out by government forces.

Stop, she thought. You're hurtling into a terrible future. This *will not* come to pass!

"We'll come through this okay, honey," she said, her voice catching. "We just have . . . to be strong." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Pill lay against her like an inert sack of pudding and bone, her eyes open but unfocused, slow blinks lidded upon them like an infant dull with sleep. Her thumb-sucking came and went but the thumb stayed firmly ensconced in her mouth.

Random shouts issued from distant hallways, coming from bunches of aroused, terrorized kids joining in a hunt for the slasher. At some point, that sick soul would be found and fattered. Then they would all be free.

She stifled a laugh.

Free.

Free to build a new life around the obsessive kernel of this night, a nightmare forever revived, recreated, relived.

No, she thought. We will get beyond this. We will process it and go on.

"We will, honey," she said. "We will."

It was almost time to thrust the drugged fucker into the mob. Almost time for him to be royally fattered.

Delia had developed a taste for blood.

But for the sake of Kitty, and to assure triumph in her pursuit of Brest and Trilby, she would wrap things up now. Call it quits. Slake the frenzied bloodthirst of the crowd with good ol' Gerber Waddell.

And emerge a survivor.

There'd be time enough, after bedding her grieving girlfriends, to maraud and slaughter once more, carefully, selectively, at random intervals.

The janitor lay propped against the wall of a corridor, a lone lightbulb throwing a harsh glare across him. Alarm lit his eyes.

She wondered if she had trussed him up too tight. Had she cut off his circulation? Would his walk be convincing? Or would they see evidence, assuming there was anything left to autopsy, that he had been bound and gagged for over an hour?

Slumped that way, Gerber looked so small.

Her toy, her plaything.

It was an odd responsibility she had taken on, this being in charge of lives and deaths, this manipulation. It made her feel creepy, and virtuous, and *powerful* all at once.

Stooping she put a hand on his shoulder and felt his muscles strain in resistance.

"You okay, big fella?"

Sweat stood on Gerber's blunt brow.

"Yeah, I thought you were."

Beyond the wall, not six feet from her roped hostage, lay the gym's north side, the bandstand where the principal spoke in low murmurs.

A squat stool on her left held a small kit of medical supplies. The syringe was out and ready, resting upon a leather pouch.

She worked Gerber's right sleeve up under the ropes, baring his arm just above the elbow. Tied him off. Smacked two fingertips against his skin. Squinted in the dim light. Found what felt like a vein and jabbed the needle in.

"This will only hurt a lot, and for a long time," she said.

She had drawn the entire ampule of liquid into the hypodermic. Now she shot it home, hard supreme power in the steady closure of her thumb, encircled by metal and slowly pressing down to dope him up good.

The janitor's eyes glazed over.

Needle out. No need for cotton. Let him bleed. Soon there'd be plenty more blood.

Delia returned the syringe to the stool and worked at his bonds. They were tight, but they were not impossible. Soon she had them off.

Gerber's eyelids had grown heavy. She undid his gag and vigorously rubbed his legs.

"No more pins and needles," she said. "It's meat-cleaver, serving-fork, and carving-knife time for you."

She had to get him up. Walk him about. He had to be convincing when she shoved him out.

At first he stumbled.

Heavy, drugged guy.

It felt as if they were on an unsteady deck, rolling and heaving with the waves.

Then he grew used to it, moving more like an obedient automaton.

His arm lay heavy across her shoulders. His big, denim-clad body stank of confinement.

"Only a little farther," she said, hoping she was right.

Years before, there'd been a math teacher, a designated slasher, who had, contrary to all law, ushered Delia into the backways the day after the prom. He had shown her about, doing his best then—and his best was piss poor—to prick her, up against the outer curves of the band room.

Her memory had sponged up the details, where they were, how they had arrived there.

Even so, the backways tended to disorient. She concentrated on direction, staggering under Gerber's unsteady weight. The things she needed to complete his condemnation waited in the walls behind the auditorium stage.

He mumbled something, his breath close and reeky.

"That's right, Gerber," she said. "It's time to die. Would you like that?"

Gerber's head lolled, his lips open and drooly. He looked vacuous and thirsty.

His janitorial boots galumphed obediently along as they walked. Though they threatened to stomp her blue bloodcaked pumps, they never quite did so.

They turned a bend.

Ah!

The series of panels on stage left appeared. A cramped three feet separated that wall from the black legs, the array of curtains that hid actors about to enter the stage proper.

A tiny table held a rag.

On the rag was an ice pick. And next to it, soaking the rag, lay an icicle, one of many Delia had found in an obscure corner of Lily Foddereau's refrigeration room, where a leak in the overhead pipes had created an inverted forest of them.

A noise sounded behind her.

Delia froze.

All night, a pair of somebodies had been cramping her style. They had almost caught sight of her leaving the machine shop with the McPhee boy's head swinging from her hand.

Again it sounded, an exchange of words.

Still distant, but that wouldn't count for shit if they saw her.

"Stand up," commanded Delia in a whisper. A large 525 hovered ghostly white above them.

The dumb fuck cooperated.

She grabbed the ice pick. Then the icicle, cold, wet, stubbornly sticking to the rag.

"Take these," she said.

Gerber's hands opened at the touch of them and closed again feebly. She gripped them tighter about the handle and the icicle.

Huge hands, loam hands.

Fumbling for the catch on the panel, she jabbed it, missed, jabbed again, and felt the mechanism obey. The panel slid open, a soft *shuck* sound. At her feet, a shaft of light fell.

The intruders were almost upon them.

"Go!" she told Gerber. "Through those curtains."

By some miracle, she got him over the lip of the panel. He moved away from her, marching like an obedient clockwork toy, just where she wanted him to go.

"Yes, that way lies good things, Gerber."

Not a moment to lose.

Should she step through after him, or hide in the backways?

Her mind dithered.

Delia chose to step through, swift in the instant of decision, feeling eyes about to light on her.

Gerber was moving, brushing black velvet but passing between the hanging legs.

Any second now he would be visible. The clamor would begin.

Fleeing to a prop closet upstage of the legs, Delia hid herself behind it.

The space was maddeningly shallow.

All it would take was one glance her way and the game would be up.

But the strange, soiled couple that emerged from the backways, and Jonquil Brindisi behind them, had eyes only for the denim-clad man making his slow entrance onto the stage.

From the first, as she and Dex explored the stairwells, Tweed had been bold in calling out to Gerber Waddell.

Reckless even.

She had known it, but her giddy state led her to take risks. And because they were brandishing some pretty mean cutlery, she felt safe.

Tweed could tell the wandering students were impressed by her and Dex's role as deputies. They had picked up strays in the hall and in the first two stairwells they examined.

In the close confines of tile and steel and gum-encrusted steps, their shouts to the janitor doubled back upon them in weird echoes.

When they reached the east stairwell, they found an odd lot of sober kids outside the door. Another lot stood inside the stairwell, their eyes fastened upon a trio of corpses.

The old feeling of helplessness flooded into Tweed again. Suddenly she had no will to hold up her knives.

Her heart held not much fondness for Cobra, Rocky, or Sandy. But violent death levels all victims.

Somehow Dex rallied.

Somehow he said just what everybody needed to hear to start them on their way toward the auditorium. Something about the principal having a plan, though Tweed couldn't recall Futzzy saying anything planworthy in the gym.

Now they were sitting with their contingent of strays in the left front block of seats, as other unsuccessful troops straggled in emptyhanded.

Their flashlight beams did a feeble dance along the sloping aisles as they walked.

Someone slow-scanned, high across the auditorium's stage-right wall, the motto painted in large gold letters: "The strength of a nation lies in the regimentation of its youth."

No one said much.

Faces were drawn.

Young shoulders slumped forlornly.

Mr. Buttweiler and Miss Phipps sat side by side on the edge of the stage. They had no plan. Dex had been speaking from some wishful place in his head. But no one, certainly not Tweed, seemed in any mood to ding him for it.

The principal's spindly legs rhythmmed at random, shoe heels nearly knocking against the stage front. Hands clasped earnestly in his lap, he leaned to say something to Miss Phipps.

She nodded.

Grimacing, he began to rise.

But when he was halfway up, Tweed's attention shot to the right.

Onstage, someone was emerging from between hanging dark curtains.

Hands, arms, chest.

Objects gleamed from his fists—

It was Gerber Waddell!

—shiny objects, a thin one, a thick one.

The janitor's face was shrouded in washes of death, the deaths he had brought about.

Futzy stood in shock, a hand at one pocket. His head hung dumbly, as if he'd just been told his best friend had died.

Tweed's brain teemed.

It's the slasher, said one part of her mind. Run!

But voices, high and fast and full of anger, were rising all about her. Another part of her mind latched onto them, found resonance with that feeling, and rose with them.

Dex shouted beside her, his face as red as a newborn robin cheeping for worms.

Sounds were issuing too from her.

The air was full of movement. Flutterings. Hard young bodies rushing forward.

Across the black floor of the stage staggered the head janitor, a dumb slow feeb of a slasher. Tweed wondered how he had surprised or bested *anyone*.

Futzy stood transfixed. Then his hand was fumbling in his pocket and he pulled out a gun, the great unequalizer, death-power packed in a fistful of metal. With a deafening blow, Futzy punched the air before him.

The feeb's left shoulder yanked back. A man and woman entered from the wings behind him.

Far from stopping Tweed and the others, the gunshot drove them into a greater frenzy. Down the aisles they teemed, surging up the stairs in a rush of bodies.

Tweed watched the couple—odd correspondence student types—seize the janitor and wrest the ice pick from him. The man drove it into his neck and left it there.

Jonquil Brindisi came onstage.

Then Tweed swept into a surge of prom fabric that rushed past the principal, rudely thrusting Futzy Buttweiler aside like flotsam in a stream. The steel gleam of fluttering cleavers winked in every hand, her own hand, Dex's too, their long knives absurdly left at their seats.

But that was okay.

One cut, one slice among the hundreds now sweeping in, would be enough.

The stage thundered as a choke of bodies came in all about. Despite the collisions, one purpose thrived. One thirst that kept the bodies honed in on the falling janitor, the hacked man whose denim suit shredded off in tufts of cloth and flesh.

In they dove, young birdbodies, a sharp hack and away, circling to swoop down for more.

Deep-hued as barbecue sauce, Gerber's blood splashed suits and dresses. *Tweed's* dress. She grew high and giddy, gaiety and rage intermingled in the sounds she made.

A man lay stripped before her, more exposed as each moment passed, bits of cloth, flesh, and organs filling the air like blood-tinged chokes of cottonwood.

She breathed meat.

She breathed madness.

Their victim's mind, sick and vicious even under attack, unspooled itself in death, flinging out darts of vileness.

But she—and all of them, this happy band of hackers and hewers—resisted those darts. In the shaping of communal grave-clouds were they caught up, weaving it, shuttled, hack by flurried hack, upon a loom of common cause.

Righteous was their wrath and beautiful.

She would tell all of this joy to her dad.

Her sister Jenna too, whose prom would be a cakewalk after this.

Through a turmoil of bodies, slapping and smacking in earnest—by God, the dance only *hinted* at it—Tweed saw her means of ingress. She seized it, rode it in, war whoops in her throat, her hand coming down, no choice really in what prize she would slice off, all of it a matter of fate and luck.

Like a coelacanth's mouth still moist from feeding, a meaty flesh-hole wuttered up at her. Its wet, red, ragged regret ovaled out to yield a slice of organ.

Slash! She held it against the blade as she pulled out, a nub of gore trapped between thumb and steel. Ms. Foddereau's butchery class paid off in spades.

"I got a nipple!" Dex screamed. "I got a nipple!"

Tweed became Dex's magnet, retiring with him upstage. Behind them, the pounding and battering of bodies kept up. In another moment, the killer would be reduced to bone, and soon that would be divvied up as well.

Tweed tugged at Dex's sleeve. "Look," she said. "Our teachers are up to their elbows in it too."

The air was misty with blood. But the spray was fine enough, atomized even, that they clearly saw Nurse Gaskin sail in; Claude Versailles, whose outsized body belied the deftness of his killer cuts; Ms. Brindisi, Miss Phipps, Mr. Buttweiler, and the others.

Tweed billowed with pride in Corundum High.

Out of a night of trauma, they were pulling together. Students and faculty alike.

For all the hell they had endured, a special bond would unite them forever, a bond as tight and conjoining as the mad janitor's fluttered body was loose and undergoing disjointure.

Tweed gripped her bloody prize and smiled at Dex, who beamed back at her and held up the ruddy whorl of his catch.

Something jinged like a spun quarter at her feet. She looked down. "A key," she said.

It was gold and thick and angled. The word YALE gleamed upon it.

"The key to the padlock on the front door is my guess," said Dex. He bent to pick it up. "The one he took from the sheriff."

Tweed touched it in Dex's hand. Hard planes. The key was wet from the janitor's fluttering, warm from his pocket.

She slid a finger along its length. She kept sliding, clasped Dex's hand, palm to palm, the key to their salvation trapped between.

Then she lost herself in her boyfriend's eyes.



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