

## Epilogue. Atonement and Payback

I was a blackened corpse  
among the living, and in this hour  
I am the fire of life  
and my flame burns up  
the darkness in the world.  
My face must be whiter  
than the glowing white face of the moon.

. . . .  
Do you see my face?  
Do you see the light that shines out of me?  
Ah! Love kills!  
But no one dies  
without having known love!

—Richard Strauss's *Elektra*,  
trans. Holland and Chalmers

. . . the secret ministry of frost  
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
Quietly shining to the quiet moon.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge,  
"Frost at Midnight"

## Epilogue: Atonement and Payback

Futzy Buttweiler and Adora Phipps, bundled up in overcoats, observed from the sidewalk in front of the Bleak residence, where Gerber Waddell had once been housed and fed.

"It's marvelous," said Futzy, "how everything came together in little more than a day."

"It is, darling," came Adora's reply. "I'm glad Tweed and Dexter suggested it."

Adora had softened him.

Students he had thought of as rapscaillionly turdsuckers on prom night, he now saw anew.

On this chilly Halloween eve, an hour after sunset, candles wuttering in one hand, Futterware containers clutched in the other, grim-faced grads made their way in slow procession along the street and up onto the lawn.

Singles, couples, and triples, Futzy forgave them all, loved them all.

The Bleaks, touched by the attention, stood on their front porch. Shyler Bleak, looking old and stooped, waved and nodded at no one in particular. His hefty wife dabbed at her eyes with the corner of a hanky. From all accounts, they had treated Gerber well.

Along Halloween sidewalks, costumed rug-rats, some holding a parent's hand, roved from house to house, ringing doorbells, shouting a high-pitched threat, and suffering the toss and smack against face or torso of twisted bags of candy, coins, or God knows what, before the doors slammed in their masked faces.

Sensing perhaps that an event of great import was transpiring outside the Bleak residence, not one of them crossed the long parade of processing students to demand treats there.

Dex and Tweed did them all proud.

They stood at one corner of an old brown comforter unfolded on the lawn, softly greeting each penitent, or simply nodding, as he or she laid down a Futtered cut of janitor within the stenciled outline of the slain man.

Bits of bone.

Nubs of sun-dried flesh.

Snailings of some internal organ.

Only by an extraordinary feat of imagination could this symbolic feint at defuttering be said to reconstitute the poor man these promgoers had hacked to pieces.

Yet it felt to Futzy that Gerber Waddell did indeed, in some significant way, manifest in these feeble tailings.

Amidst the moonlit scumble of his flesh, good old Gerber returned to forgive and forget, to fire them up for the revenge that lay ahead.

A lone child in a skeleton suit and mask, its pre-teen lobes absurdly scored with painted bone-shapes, stopped to tug on the principal's sleeve and ask, "Aren't you Futzy Buttweiler?"

The girl (or boy) held a grocery bag weighted with goodies, half of which, if statistics compiled the previous year held, were tainted with rat poison, razors, or finely ground glass. From the tone of the question, Futzy's TV notoriety had sunk a deep set of roots into at least one little mind in Corundum.

"Yes, I am," he admitted.

"You could use this," said the kid, reaching into his bag and drawing out a wrapped lollipop, which thrust up from a skeletal hand: a scepter, a sucker, a challenge.

Futzy took it. "Thank you," he said.

"You need to put it in your *mouf*, Futzy."

That was what TV fame did for you. It gave everybody the right to call you by your first name. Even some upstart brat.

Adora's hand tensed on his arm.

"I'll have it later," said Futzy.

"No, now," said the child, its moon-white chin bobbing beneath a stiff mask edge. "I want to watch you suck on it. I need to see the stick pokin' outa your lips."

"Don't," cautioned Adora.

But he had to.

There was no urgency, no brattiness, in the kid. If Futzy held firm, he would probably shrug and pass on.

It was simply a matter of mood.

The ritual that was unfolding before him made the space where they stood feel charmed, blessed, and strangely . . . safe.

Futzy patted his wife's hand. He undid the brown twist of paper, eyed the amber glisten of a moonlit sphere of candy, and popped it into his mouth.

Hard ball roofing his palate.

Root beer.

Was there another flavor? Some toxin being released? Beginning its lethal work?

Futzy didn't think so.

He slurped it out and said, "Mmmm." Then, "Thank you, my good man."

"I'm a *girl!*" objected the trick-or-treater with puffed-up annoyance and went her way, her bag brushing noisily against her bone-suit.

"So you are," said Futzy, craning about to watch her painted hipbones fluoresce on down the sidewalk.

"Are you okay?" asked Adora, alarmed.

"Yes," he said. "Want a lick?"

She thought a second, then shook her head as if ashamed of her decision.

Futzy popped it back in.

Root beer.

He observed the older boys and girls, his former charges. There on the lawn of the Bleak residence, they were learning a critical lesson in solemnity and sobriety, one that no school could teach. When they were done, they huddled around Gerber's remains for a good long while, letting their candles burn down.

Before long, Claude and Jonquil would arrive with the implements they needed for Delia Gaskin's comeuppance. Then all of them would proceed, in a different mood entirely, to the town cemetery.

Futzy felt the eagerness building.

In himself and in everyone present.

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Delia Gaskin checked her face in the hall mirror at Brest and Trilby's house, where she had pretty much taken up residence.

Funny how you could kill people, going right straight counter to the law, and still appear as normal as everyone else. Even Wigwag hadn't seen a change in her, loving her without reserve right up to the day she'd brought him to the vet and had him put down; but then dogs were just that way.

One thing was clear: There weren't no God. And there weren't no voice of conscience neither. All of that was part and parcel of the contrived guilt society heaped on your head and jabbed into your mind, hoping to corral your nastier impulses.

I'm a pretty little number when I get gussied up, thought Delia, indulging in a moment's preen. All spiffed up for the delight of Brest and Trilby. She would turn them way the fuck on.

And they her.

Glancing one last time at her suit—no lint, no dandruff, lookin' fine—Delia ventured out into the night.

The evening before, when her lovers returned from Claude's house without Pill, they'd told her the little girl was doing fine. Tweed and Dexter Poindexter, the young fools who had escaped the blade on prom night, had begged to have Pill sleep over so they could take her out tonight for trick-or-treating.

Though Delia's bedmates begged off sex, they made her hot with plans to meet them this evening near the crypt Bix Donner was immured in for some steamy lobeplay.

The graveyard lay less than a mile from their house. Delia saw no need to drive. Besides, it was a beautiful night to watch the starlight spill across square after square of sidewalk, her heels hard and sharp as she walked.

Monsters and goblins parted to let her pass.

Delia gave cheery hi-there's to clusters of them. She exchanged good-natured grins with moms and dads holding some apparition's little hand.

One foolish vampire, out all by himself, she swatted with sufficient force that he rose nearly a foot into the air. The solitary tyke's glow-in-the-dark fangs flew out of his mouth and skittered across the pavement, as did his candy, his apples, and his coins. He ran off bawling into the night.

*That'd* teach the little dummy a lesson in safety, thought Delia. She ought to have dragged the little shit behind a bush and broken his neck. Up out of the flesh-twist of his throat would his final breath have struggled, his blanched makeup a deathmask ready-made.

But Delia had sex on her mind.

When that was so, little else mattered.

She reached the end of Pine Street, went one block north to Maple, and turned west.

A hundred yards ahead lay the entrance to the cemetery. The long swung locked metal gate kept cars out, but night visitors on foot could easily and legally sidestep it.

Her old flame, Kitty Buttweiler, was buried in the far corner of the cemetery. Kitty was no doubt resting easier since the night Delia had avenged her death.

It had been the right thing to do.

Of that she was certain.

But it was good that Bix's crypt lay farther south, in a different part of the grounds.

As Delia approached it, she marveled anew at the upkeep Corundum put into its cemetery: Tall dark oaks lofting like dancers into the night sky. Immaculately kept lawns. Fat gravestones huddled close together. All of it attested to the town's wealth and neighborliness.

She didn't notice the wisps of . . . could it be fog? . . . until they began to curl about her ankles.

Odd.

The night air felt on the edge of nippy.

But fog, even the slightest lick of it, seemed not quite right.

For the first time in ages, Delia tasted fear, a cold thumb on the back of her neck that sent shivers up into her brain and down along her spine.

But then Brest appeared, Trilby too, around a corner of the crypt.

Brest blew her a kiss.

Delia waved and swept forward. The low white fog now definitely lingered longer, claiming more ground. It coiled in cable-thick wisps that appeared, absurdly, to seep from the crypt itself.

*Dry ice*, came the recognition.

And the next: *I've got to get out of here.*

Then the fog darkened up from behind the markers. Only it wasn't fog.

It was heads and torsos.

As if by prearranged signal they emerged, and Delia backed into arms, arms that enfolded her and rushed her forward.

Her feet left the ground.

She fell back and up, secured from falling, abruptly horizontal, the stars going by overhead, imperfections underfoot making the way unsteady.

Her limbs were caught in vises.

As she craned about, Delia recognized the faces of those that carried her.

Students. Faculty. Fellow staffers. They refused to meet her eyes. Their faces grim-set, they ignored her protests.

Delia twisted and strained.

To no avail.

It was like her frustration when her older brother locked her in whatever wrestling grip he liked back when she was eight.

"No!" she cried. Deaf ears. "Please!"

The principal and mousy Miss Phipps joined Brest and Trilby. Futzy made a gesture and the mass of people swung around the crypt.

A burly figure lofted into moonlight.

The Ice Ghoul.

Or what had been left of it and retrievable from the theater prop room.

His head and half of his chest topped a tall pair of stepladders, his height half what it had been last May, but his angle of menace caught to perfection.

Between the shoulders of two of the heedless automatons that carried her, Delia saw Jonquil Brindisi and Claude Versailles standing beside the homeless pair who had, in the wake of prom night, become media darlings.

"Mr. Versailles, Ms. Brindisi!" she cried. "Help me!"

The planes of Jonquil Brindisi's face were as cold and smooth as sheared ice. It was clear she took umbrage at Delia's direct address.

Her chiseled slip of a nose flared. Her eyes glowered.

"Strip her," she commanded, rasping the order in offended tones. "Tie her up."

Hands mauled her, lowered her.

They ripped her garments, the blouse collar choking her until it tore free.

Cool air kissed her naked breasts, working its way through young rough hands and arms.

Her hips, her thighs, her legs twisted as though machine-caught in the mob's rip of skirt fabric, pantyhose, and frilly crotchless silken panties.

They exposed her, somehow never letting go their grip on her limbs, giving her no chance to escape.

A cool thick clamp snapped about one ankle, about the other. The press of bodies concealed them from view. But the same sensation gripped her wrists, and then she saw the rope. It was thick. Shiny new. Thin sharp bristles randomly porcupined from the twisted wheaten cable.

Rope-ties were tugged and tightened.

Were they trying to quarter her?

Delia guessed not. But the muscles of her thighs strained like whipped sails and the ball sockets at her shoulders threatened to dislocate.

At last, the hands that had held her lifted away. Night air touched her everywhere.

If she failed to tense her neck muscles, her head flopped back onto nothing.

She was stretched taut. Relentless pulls on her arms and legs came from four thick, angled, toddler-high posts sunk in the ground and notched to secure the rope. The moon illumined the flesh-shelf her body made.

By name she appealed to them. The students, Dex, Tweed, Jenna. Pye Pringle, a wispy junior who hung around Jenna and whom Delia, two days prior, had patched up in the nurse's office.

Pye looked away.

Then the principal stepped in. "All right," he said, his face harsh and rough, "peel it off."

They *wouldn't*.

That was her first thought.

Then it was too late for any thought at all.

They surged in. The urgency of their mass move puffed a night chill across her naked body.

"Wait, no!" she said.

But the air filled with shouting.

Crudely wielded scalpels carpeted up layers of skin, as fingernails dug into the soft yield of her flesh and tore it away, patch by patch.

Agony sheeted her limbs.

Ankles, calves, thighs, then her arms, caught fire and turned to flameless torches.

Up hip, down torso, at her navel, the flames spread and met. The shock to Delia's system suspended her between screaming and blacking out.

Then they slid the blades beneath the skin on her face, peeling upward from the neck, over chin and cheek, pulling at her eyelids so severely that the inflamed lids were almost torn off before they plipped back down on her eyes.

Clots of hair, as had happened below, came up in impatient hands. Her body became a living suit of ravagement.

Black dots danced amid red. Delia's tears stung like acid as they runneled down her temples.

Her tormentors backed off. The night breeze rippled razors, thin and multitudinous, along the neural skintorch Delia had become. She willed herself, despite the steady eruption of pain, to escape into oblivion.

But oblivion refused her.

Then she heard a familiar sound, multiplied a hundred times, again, again.

Rustles of burst-open plastic wrap.

The restless sound of many fingers finding their careful way around metal.

Out of the hubbub of mob noise, one word seeped through over and over on hushed, hissed esses.

Syringe.

When Delia's tears cleared, she took in the surround of bodies.

The poised hands.

Chest-high about the moonlit circle, there shimmered, like ice, thin silver down-stabs of frozen rain.

"Slowly," the principal said. "Carefully. Stay away from the vital organs. We want this to last."

Then they began to needle her.

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Dex stood arm in arm with Tweed, detached from the melee of torture.

If a press of bodies obscured his view, he let it. So did Tweed.

They were ageless, he thought. An aggrieved couple watching justice meted out but not fired up with bloodlust.

He felt excited and jazzed, of course.

What self-respecting American wouldn't?

But more than that, Dex felt pity.

This was one twisted woman. A betrayer, a violator, the executioner of young folks who did not deserve to die.

Oddly enough, she was also his savior.

And Tweed's.

Futzy Buttweiler, in a moment of rare candor, had confided to them that Zane Fronemeyer's packet held his name and Tweed's that night.

A chill had coursed through him.

For all his bluster, Dex would have been no match for Mr. Fronemeyer. He would have suffered the fatal wound. Then he'd have seen Tweed fall beneath the knife blade, feeling the life ebb from him as she, in agony, struggled and died.

They felt relief.

And guilt.

Their slaughter would have fallen into the normal course of events, a sacrifice sad but accepted.

But the slaughter of Tweed's dad, of the sheriff, Jiminy Jones, the Fronemeyers, and all those kids? Those killings were perverse. They cut across the grain of all that was right and proper in American society.

Nurse Gaskin's deserved death would punctuate these atrocities. The media would, as ever, find renewed closure and new reasons to fret about whatever turned their fret-brains on and made their subscription rates rise.

But her death would not *undo* her atrocities, not even when the dead woman did her stint, the following spring, as a pinata.

Tweed had said as much, and Dex agreed.

Maybe that was what growing up was all about.

You got to see how ragged-edged life was, and how tidy the *stories* about life were.

It was a comfort, to confuse one for the other. But it was also a comfort, and a sanity, to know the difference and quietly accept it.

Dex gave his wife a squeeze.

"I love you," he said.

"What did you say?" she shouted over the melee.

"I said I love you!"

Tweed's eyes twinkled. She gave him a kiss, then turned her gaze again toward the staked and sought-after murderess before them.

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Jenna had been one of the first students to sink a needle into Nurse Gaskin.

She had chosen a spot on the right arm, where the nurse's strained biceps ramped along above her elbow.

Jenna thrust it in deep enough that when she released it and stepped back, it only angled down a little and stayed stuck there. But she left an inch or so out, so that those who came later, the kids without a syringe of their own, could shove hers in deeper.

That was the considerate thing to do.

Share the vengeance.

Some kids slid under her and put theirs in from below. Those didn't stay stuck, of course. Gravity wouldn't allow it.

So some of them shoved it in again along her sides as they regained their feet.

Others circled around for another stab into buttock or back, the blood from earlier puncture wounds anointing them as dry-ice mist curled about them.

"Cripes," some kid said. "Nursie's a fuckin' pin cushion, ain't she?"

Jenna and Pish exchanged get-a-clue looks.

Guys were so transparent when they wanted to hit on you, a window onto Geek City.

They ignored him.

He got the hint and drifted away. Some boys were so dense though. Surely everyone knew about her and Bo Meacham, about her and Pish Balthasar.

Jenna was off limits and happy to be so.

Pish of the smoky eyes said, "She's beautiful when she writhes." She was staring at the nurse's parted legs.

The hypos were so numerous, they seemed to weave weird metallic leggings, or some sort of oriental armor that halted at the parts most in need of protection.

Beautiful?

Yes, thought Jenna.

An image came to her of a cautiously smiling beekeeper covered in bees.

In her fight against pain, against death, the nurse seemed larger than life. Like a living suit, the forest of hypos magnified the nurse's body, the jerk of her movements.

Hers was a dance of denial.

It was also, strangely enough, a dance of affirmation, a struggle to embrace death.

"She *is* beautiful," said Jenna, touching Pish's friendship lobe so that the pretty dark-haired genius shut her eyelids in a gesture of surrender. "She'll look super, hanging up."

"Mmmmm," murmured Pish, looking like a Manx with a dead goldfish in its mouth.

For an instant, but how glorious an instant, Jenna imagined the fluxidermed nurse swaying above the warmth of the prom.

Her body was stuffed with blood sweets, hard circles of cinnamon and cherry, wrapped in twists of plastic and shaped like platelets.

She hung from ropes, those same ropes Sheriff Blackburn had dangled from, as an amazing sweep of lights played over her.

In Jenna's vision, the dance band was playing dreamy, caramel-taffy music.

Below the unclothed nurse lay two slain seniors.

She and Pish would survive.

They *had* to, to see this beautiful scene, and to be a part of it.

Midnight would arrive.

Then they would futter the couple. Futter them so fiercely, the blood would spew up, paint the nurse's bloated belly, and drip back down.

And when at last the orgy of futtering was done and the corpses not much more than memory, everyone would be given sticks tipped in needles only a little shorter than tonight's.

They would poke and jab, watching the dead nurse's body jiggle and swing at rope's end.

Her skin would rip open.

And out would spill a gorefall of candy, pelting them, battering their laughing blood-smeared faces and raining into their upthrust hands.

Taffy music would cream upon them.

Pish and Bo, in their bloody prom clothing, would smother Jenna in delirious hugs.

And life would begin in earnest.

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At the last minute, Tweed handed her syringe to a former classmate. He had given a rebel yell and surged in, his body as thick and bulky as a rhino.

Dex had watched her give it to him.

Tweed shrugged, and Dex understood. Their minds were that attuned.

She felt no hard feelings toward the nurse. The wild scene unfolding before them seemed, even as it happened, a vivid memory. She nudged Dex, whose eyes were glued to the controlled carnage, the invaded body, the stream of needlers flowing in, out, and around Nurse Gaskin.

He turned to look at Tweed.

"Over here," she said, taking his arm.

Her father's plot lay close by. The screams, the mob sounds, were scarcely muted.

Above the top of the crypt, an illumined ridge of red papier-mache resolved itself into a slice of scalp, the twist of a ghoulish ear.

Tweed's gaze caressed the letters cut into her father's headstone. BORN SINGING, they said. And below that, SINGING STILL.

"He would have sung some interesting things tonight," said Dex, his voice full and fond.

"Life is short," said Tweed. "Dad knew that."

"Should we go? Or do you want to watch her die and hear what Mr. Buttweiler has to say?"

She shook her head. "There's no need."

"Okay."

"But I would like something else."

When Dex asked what that might be, Tweed knelt to her backpack, which she had set against her father's gravestone.

I love you, Dad, she thought. She wished he could be there for this.

Unzipping the pack, she reached deep into its cloth wound.

"Ms. Gaskin sure can scream," Dex said.

It thrilled Tweed, that sound.

The screams felt as if they were coming from Nurse Gaskin's deepest secret self, as hidden as the murderous part of her, close to the angels, a dark rich soil given voice.

It made sense of the universe.

And it offered a perfect backdrop for Tweed's revelation.

She withdrew a thermos and a tall tumbler.

When Dex turned back from the scream, he saw what she was doing and broke into tears.

"Oh, Tweed. Really?"

"Yes," she said.

She rose, uncapped it, poured until the glass swirled brimful of moonlight.

Then she set the thermos on stone, took a long cool swallow, and held the tumbler out to the father-to-be.

Nurse Gaskin's howls of pain corona'd Dex's head. He was crying.

How lovely her man was.

They would make a beautiful baby.

Tweed touched his friendship lobe, warmed it in her fingers, and kissed it with sweet ardency.

Then she took Dex's right hand and fisted it about the tumbler.

"Drink," she said. "For our love."

And he did.

His tears subsided. Through what remained of them, he smiled.

Then he raised the glass.

Over wounded-gazelle screams, a benediction from a supportive cosmos, Tweed watched the water glug down his throat, its silver backwash sloshing at his upper lip.

When he had emptied it, he smashed it against her father's headstone. Lifting her in his arms, Dex gave Tweed the deepest, wettest, sloppiest, most soul-stirring kiss she had ever known.

Life was good indeed.

And it was about to get a whole lot better.



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