

## 24. The Mouths of Babes

Friday, October twenty-sixth.

Jonquil Brindisi, her long legs crossed, sat in Claude's generous futon chair, sipping a banana daiquiri as she listened to Futzy Buttweiler and Delia Gaskin hold forth from the couch.

Futzy had called them all together, the major players who had survived the prom. They needed some sort of closure, he said, and he was right.

A lot of changes had come down.

Claude had divorced his wives and swiftly remarried. His new mates? The couple Jonquil herself had lusted after until the state of their earlobes had cooled her passions.

The three of them sat now in clunky dining room chairs, listening and nodding.

Lovey-dovey motherfuckers.

Futzy had replaced his pair of hellions with Adora Phipps. While they insisted a third would *surely* come along any day now, Jonquil doubted they were looking in any serious way.

And no secret to anyone and not a scandal to the unbigoted, Delia Gaskin, while maintaining the fiction of a separate residence, was deep in lust with Bix Donner's widows, Trilby and Brest, their threesome a virtual marriage.

Trilby's little whistleblower knelt alone on the living room carpet. Pill busied herself with a deck of cards, some weird sorting exercise whose rules only an eight-year-old could divine.

Near Pill sat Tweed and her kid sister Jenna, crosslegged on pillows. They bookended a chipper Dexter Poindexter, who had replaced a slaughtered bank clerk at First National soon after the prom.

"Now that the media brouhaha has died down," continued Futzy, Adora's loving eyes on him, "I thought a nice quiet evening of putting the pieces together would benefit us all."

Claude nodded and spoke. "A final look at things, one last breath and benediction before we move on with our lives. Is that what you mean?"

Jonquil, bemused, said nothing.

What a load of crap this was. Were they a bunch of fucking wimps? She could take on such a night again easily. Truth be told, she missed it already. The terror, the hunt, the fluttering of the crazy janitor whose bones she had wanted to leap but had ended up breaking instead.

Might it somehow happen again?



She thrilled at the thought.

"Yes," said Nurse Gaskin. "Victims of major traumas tend to obsess about them. We should look on this retelling as a ritual signpost, a mark of punctuation on the way to healing."

"Back to normal after tonight, eh?" said Jonquil. The looks Bray and Winnie gave her reinforced her doubt.

"By no means." Nurse Gaskin's eyes flared with hatred.

Then she smoothed it over.

Delia Gaskin, in Jonquil's opinion, needed to be taken down a few notches. The upstart bitch in whites had far too lofty an opinion of herself.

"The horror of that night," the nurse said, "will haunt us for the rest of our lives. But going over the ground again may make it in some sense manageable."

With that, she and Futzzy launched into a retelling of the events of prom night.

Like obedient little androids, the others, everyone but Jonquil, chimed in with one part of the story or another.

Jonquil clinked and sipped, remarking what odd ducks she had fallen in with. Between bouts of savage fucking in the supply closet, she liked to regale Benji Rubblerum, the new head janitor, with stories about her colleagues and how very odd they were.

Then the weird thing happened.

Futzzy and the school nurse, caught up in their tale, came to the killing of Pesky and Flense in the faculty lounge.

Jonquil saw seeds of worry sprout in Trilby Donner's eyes.

Her little girl looked up from her playing cards, listening and staring.

Jonquil might have jumped in to deflect the telling. But she loved to witness the fruits of violence, especially violence inflicted in all innocence.

"Then," said the nurse, who wore a stylish denim dress, long-sleeved, with embroidery that suggested cowboy motifs, "it's my guess that old Gerber took a pellet of dry ice in his gloved fist and forced the poor girl to swallow it."

Her hands illustrated as she spoke.

"Miss Gaskin!" said Trilby, ever the mom.

Then Pill's eyes bugged out. Her eyelids fluttered and she keeled over. No one was near enough to break her fall.

But the girl, on her knees already, did not fall far. In a glancing blow, her scalp knocked against the futon frame. The cards she cupped in her hands fanned out over the carpet, a sprawl of red and black and white.

Jonquil observed it all coolly.

She clinked her ice.

It looked as if the poor girl was choking on her tongue.

She would die if no one helped.

But the nurse barreled in to clear the girl's passageway, hovering like a benevolent angel. She rubbed Pill's hands vigorously, feeling for pulse and heartbeat, moving deft fingers everywhere on her body. "She'll be all right, I think. Claude, do you have maybe a day bed Pill can lie down on?"

"There's the guest room upstairs, with the coats. Just shove them aside."

"Trilby, why don't you stay with her, out of earshot of the rest of this?" Delia said.

Upstart bitch.

Granted, Little Miss Nursiepoo was caught up in a minicrisis. But that gave her no excuse for addressing Claude as Claude, for calling Trilby Trilby. It ought to have been Mr. Versailles and Ms. Donner, even outside working hours.

In the privacy of her threesome, the bitch could use first names all she liked. But in mixed company, it was unseemly, an affront to all decent Americans.

The two women took Pill upstairs.

Delia Gaskin returned and the tale continued. But no one was into it much any more.

Jonquil, when she wasn't mulling how best to puncture the nurse's inflated ego, saw that Pill's fainting spell had brought back the terror of that night in everyone here.

Jenna Megrin, a sweet senior whose prom would occur six months from now, who had lost her father and almost her sister as well, seemed most upset.

But the pall lay upon them all.

Delicious.

When they stood up to disperse, Brest checked with Trilby and Pill upstairs.

Then she left with Delia Gaskin.

It saved time, *lots* of time, Jonquil later realized, that the rest of them were still mixing and milling when Pill, holding her mother's hand, appeared on the stairs and began to tell them why she had fainted.

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When Pill awoke, she didn't know at first where she was. Mommy was holding her hand and feeling her forehead, and Mommy's new secret sort-of-wife Delia was standing over her, saying, "I think she's coming out of it."

A huge turned-away snoozing bear lay beside Pill on the bed.

Coats.

A lamp with a frilly green shade cast a soft glow from the nightstand. The overhead light had been switched off.

Then Pill remembered.

But she managed not to show it, not even when Delia stared right into her eyes.

"You okay, Pill?" Mommy asked.

"Uh huh."

Delia said, "You gave us a scare."

"I'm sorry, Delia," she said.

Mommy bent and laughed and kissed Pill on the cheek and told her not to worry, that she was just delighted to have her back among the living.

Delia examined her, holding her wrist tight with a concentrated frown, and then moving Pill's head in strange ways by the neck and jaw.

Pill didn't much like Delia. She hadn't much liked her since Daddy died, or even before. But her two mommies seemed to like her a whole bunch, especially Brest.

So Pill only shared the way she really felt with Gigi the goat. In whispers, late at night, under the covers.

But now, she *especially* didn't like Delia.

Luckily Delia left and Mommy stayed behind.

"Mommy?" Pill said.

"Yes, dear?"

"I need to tell you something."

The telling was hard. At one point, Mommy began to cry and Pill almost wished she hadn't told her anything at all.

But in spite of her crying, Mommy was a tough lady. Pill knew that already, from the rough love her mommy sometimes shared with Daddy and Brest. She knew it from her limps and winces and from the way moonlight lit her bruises when she came in late at night to kiss Pill on the cheek, and Pill pretended to be sleeping.

Mommy cried and sighed and blew her nose.

But when Brest came up and said she and Delia would be off and asked was Pill okay, Mommy said, "She's fine."

Then her face got all dark. She added, "Make some excuse. Drop Delia off at her place and come back without her."

"I don't understand," Pill's second mommy said. "Is there—"

"I'll explain when you come back."

Pill was proud of her mother.

"Don't let on that anything's out of the ordinary, okay?"

Brest said she wouldn't. She found her coat in the pile on the bed, Delia's too, and left the room.

Mommy held Pill. She told her she was her sweet pumpkin. "We'll give them five minutes," she said. "Then we'll go downstairs."

But Mommy kept looking at her watch and Pill knew that nowhere near five minutes had passed when Mommy told her it was time, hustle her buns, chop-chop.

It felt strange, like being in a fishbowl, to leave the bedroom holding Mommy's hand and see all the grown-ups standing in clumps downstairs.

They stopped when Mommy said something. They all looked up.

Then Pill told them.

Just like she told Mommy.

It was really hard this time. It felt as if she were back in that closet again, but this time Mommy was with her.

It was okay to see the hand moving again, *Delia's* hand in that same gesture, the dry ice pellet in her glove.

And it was okay to hear *Mjust askin'!* again, realizing now that the big girl saying it was really saying *Miss Gaskin!*

Pill worried at first that she wouldn't be able to tell it the way it happened, so the grown-ups would get a clear picture. But she saw from their faces that they did.

They got it clear all right, Mr. Buttweiler, the principal, most of all. Pill could see that in the blush of his blotchy skin.

And in what came next.

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Futzy looked at little Pill on the landing, listening as she drew the correct conclusion from that terrible night. She was an angel, and this was her annunciation.

If he tried, he could hear her voice deepen into his slain daughter's voice. He could see her sprout a foot taller, her breasts plump out, her first lobebag being slipped over her love-lobe when she came of age. She was Kitty all over again.

Kitty had come back, his beloved girl, to set things right.

Adora had enriched his homelife.

Now his daughter had returned to fix the rest of it.

When Pill finished, she gazed up at her mom.

"Oh wow," said Jenna Megrim.

Heads turned.

"What is it, Jenna?" Futzy asked.

"I was parking cars that night. I remember, after it was all over, wondering why the janitor's car was parked in the faculty and staff lot. But then I figured he knew the combination into the backways and didn't need to drive into the so-called, not-really-secret garage everybody knows about and use the underground elevator.

"What I didn't see, until Pill was talking just now, was that—and I've gone over this a hundred times in my head—the nurse's blue clunker was *never* in the parking lot, at least not up to the moment the school was padlocked shut."

"She was inside long before then," Jonquil said coolly.

Futzy recalled how quickly Delia had left that night, not through the front door like floods of relieved seniors did. Ten minutes later, when Jonquil, Adora, Winnie, and Bray joined him in exploring the backways, Matthew Megrim had been discovered. Soon after, they found the hapless history teacher's car by the elevator. Hints of gas fumes suggested that the motor had recently been on, though that made no sense.

It hadn't been his fumes at all.

It had been Delia's.

So Futzy told the gathering of survivors.

"Something else," Winnie said from the couch, holding Claude's hand and Bray's. "The coroner's report repeatedly mentioned right-handed stabs to the bodies. Now I remember the janitor at the light bank lifting a hand to adjust the lights just before the music started. Did anyone else see that?"

Tweed spoke up. "We were on the bandstand. Me and Dex." She looked up to recapture it. "The janitor was raising his left hand, kinda drifting it hazily over the switches, struggling to recall which ones he was supposed to throw."

Futzy brought back other scenes. Gerber Waddell screwing in lightbulbs, triangulating an American flag, weeding flower beds in front of the school. He saw Gerber's left hand moving, ever moving, his right hand idle or thumb-tucked into his belt.

Futzy looked at Trilby Donner's little girl. "Pill," he said, "which hand did you see holding that dry ice pellet? Can you remember?"

"I think so," the little girl said.

Gripping the oak railing, she brought the scene back with a squinch and a twist to her face. The narrow crack through which she had seen the killer's arm.

Her hands let go, shaping a slow fog before her. First the left rose, then stopped, falling back into place. Then with increasing certainty, the other, the right, lifted, finding its fixed place in the air, holding the invisible pellet, the arm, the hand, a gesture of strength mixed with delicacy.

The movement of Pill's hand matched precisely Delia's gesture on the couch, right before the little girl had fainted.

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Trilby Donner, once more in shock and torn umpteen ways, listened as the questions confirmed what all this had been leading to.

Delia Gaskin, Brest's hush-hush lover and her own, had, by dint of damning evidence, just been convicted of multiple deaths: Zane Fronemeyer and his wives, Sheriff Blackburn, Jiminy Jones, a slew of seniors in the midst of a night of terror, and then, to redirect the finger of accusation, poor innocent Gerber Waddell, a feeb falsely fluttered, his reputation forever besmirched.

Trilby felt shame.

And violation.

How could a person seem so decent, mouth all the words of love one could ever hope to hear, yet beneath that facade be monstrous?

She and Brest were still deep in grief over Bix's death.

Now, their relationship had once again been ripped raw. A betrayer had wrapped herself about their ailing hearts, a snake whose hooded guile had penetrated deep to the soul.

Trilby's hand went to her mouth.

Her eyes teared up.

Keep it together, keep it together.

Focus on Pill.

Focus on her beautiful innocent girl, nodding to this or that question from the gathered adults, her words pure and carefully chosen.

Pill was not the easiest child to raise. She tested for boundaries. She gave guff. She pushed back.

But always, Trilby sensed her child's secret delight in being reined in, in knowing where the limits were.

Trilby had feared, coming off the prom, a shattering. She had seen Pill move this way and that in new psychic space, struggling to keep her balance in a world rearranged, a world from which her father had been violently ripped.

But now, here in Claude Versailles' living room (how she wished Brest could witness it), Pill was taking confident steps onto solid ground. In this precious eight-year-old girl, her childlike honesty in full display, Trilby had her first glimpse of the proud woman her daughter would become.

This vision anchored her.

These were her friends and colleagues, their eyes afire with appalled awe at the deception and temerity of Delia Gaskin. But primarily their eyes brimmed with wonder at the emergence of Pill, *her* Pill, her lovely daughter, getting near to being gangly of limb, a slim barely-there little girl in bib overalls and close-skulled brown hair.

Her friends could not save Trilby from the madness of the moment, but Pill could. For all her quiet frailty, Pill would pull her mother through; Trilby sensed it deep in her heart.

So too would it be with Brest.

Somehow they would survive this time, keeping a dread secret from the monster in their lives, as would Pill (her innocence wily enough not to tell Delia a thing), until this close-knit community took its proper revenge upon her.

That revenge would not be long in coming.

Already, as the final questions to Pill were asked and answered, Trilby saw wheels turning.

In Futzy Buttweiler.

In Jonquil Brindisi.

In Claude Versailles.

Retribution would be swift and sure.

She and Brest, newly wounded and raw, would be seen after.

More important, Pill would see her father's murderer dealt with. She would forgive her mommies for their bad choice, rectified at once and explained when she was much older. And she would find firm footing in this marvelous society in the greatest country on the face of the planet.

From the midst of torment, a new seed of hope and solidarity would sprout.

Trilby had never loved her daughter more than she did at this moment. That's what her tears, freely flowing now, announced to all who cared to observe them.

Hope was justified, she thought, even when life seemed most hopeless.



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