

## 25. Piecing Together What Was Torn Asunder

Bray looked up at the sound of Claude's front door opening. In walked Brest Donner from having dropped Delia Gaskin home.

Brest was a hard woman, he thought. Beauty edged with greed, an inturnd nature. Before too many years had passed, her great-eagle sweep and flare would droop into something vulturish.

Bray considered the abomination this woman had instigated: a female threesome.

He couldn't help but be judgmental about such a perverted combination of partners. Despite his years as an outcast and the prejudicial treatment he had suffered, there were certain personal choices that struck him as simply wrong. Three women in a sexual entanglement was one of them. Didn't the Bible have a few prohibitions against that sort of thing? He believed it did.

"Okay, what's up?" said Brest. "A surprise party?"

Everyone spoke at once. While the confusion was sorting itself out, Bray whispered to Winnie, "They'll slap us in jail."

She goggled at him. "Jeepers, Bray, *now* what's your problem?"

"We were heroes, weren't we? You and me, the two social pariahs, especially. We did the media circuit and the world changed, a tiny bit anyway."

"So?"

"So now the story will turn way the fuck around: We made a mistake, we got fooled, we fucked up. They'll take everything back, they'll try us for Gerber's murder, they'll demonize us, it'll be *Notorious* for sure."

Claude leaned to Winnie. "Is our handsome yummy-nums lapsing into Bray-mode again?"

"He sure is," Winnie said.

"Be not dismayed, hubby ours," Claude said. "Everyone in this room, without exception, was Delia's dupe."

That was true. Claude had a way of cutting to the heart. He was also a mean flogger when the mood struck him.

"*All* of us made a mistake," continued Claude, "which we simply must, with all deliberate speed, rectify. If we visit right retribution upon our wayward school nurse, they'll make us heroes all over again. The public loves seeing justice meted out. Calm down, Bray, sweetie. Let come what may."

Claude sat back, not waiting to see if Bray followed his advice. Claude *knew* he would. His confidence, Bray thought, was irritating, but it wasn't misplaced. Claude knew him.



Claude knew them both.

Had sexy Jonquil Brindisi not been so deeply bigoted, it would have been sweet and savory for them to have tripled up with her. But Claude, the more he and Winnie got to know him, was a pretty decent companion. He treated them well, he was fun to listen to, and he cooked a mean omelette.

"I just don't like it," Bray muttered, but only for form's sake.

Winnie's look said, I love you, you doofus, despite your fretting and moaning.

Meanwhile, Brest had clearly been struggling to make sense of the babble. As everyone spoke up, fitting in this or that piece of the puzzle for her, Trilby held her hand.

Pill leaned against her mother and listened, looking tired but otherwise like any other eight-year-old up past her bedtime.

Bray twiddled his fingers at her, a spastic butterfly caught chest high. Pill gave a wisp of a smile and twiddled back.

The plan for dealing with Delia Gaskin came in part from Futzy Buttweiler and in part—indeed the *killer* part—from Jenna Megrim.

Bray listened in fascination as their plan gathered shape and momentum. Carrying it out, he sensed, would provide the healing for which they had come together. As one part of the plan meshed with another, their conspiratorial circle took on centripetal force. Heads angled in like sharpened stakes in a concealed pit.

Only Jonquil held back, sipping her drink.

Bray gave her a brief look of wistful lust, to which Jonquil dutifully shot back an intolerant glare full of fire and fuck-you.

Still, her compact, killer, curvaceous legs, crossed just so, boggled Bray's brain. He longed to uncross them, to shred those dark stockings, to dip down into the warm moist fire of her loins and tongue up the juices that sizzled there.

Right, he thought. Not in this lifetime.

Winnie elbowed him. Listen up, Bray, her look commanded him.

Bray listened.

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Dex sat on the floor against an overstuffed armchair, intent on the grown-ups' conversation.

Tweed sat huggably close on his right, her sister Jenna's head on his left thigh.

Despite Dex's graduation the previous spring and his coming-up-on six months at First National, clerking away as if he'd done it forever, he still felt very much a kid.

The terrors of the prom had indeed aged him. And this evening's revelations went even further toward drawing his youth to a close. But maturity wasn't something you snapped on like a toolbelt.

It was strange being a boy.

Boys were expected to show strength. Not to cry, or only on special occasions.

But really the girls were in charge.

With *decent* boys anyway.

He had heard of the rougher sort of guys, who threw their rage around and made things nasty for the women in their lives. They were just wacked-out dudes, far as he was concerned.

But among normal people, the women held sway and everybody knew it.

There were even jokes about it.

Now he had learned that it wasn't sick-guy Gerber Waddell, but sick-girl Delia Gaskin, who had been the prom killer.

Poor Gerber, a kind retard with a nasty past and a brain pruned back to cut out his nastiness, they had fattered by mistake.

And Miss Gaskin walked about, bold as brass, wearing a mask of innocence, even trysting on the sly with the widows of the same Bix Donner whose life she herself had ended.

She had to be insane.

To think that he had visited the nurse's office, what, at least half a dozen times during his four-year stint at Corundum High. She could have sliced him up, fed him poison pills, or God knows *what*-all.

She could have done that to *anyone*.

Maybe she had.

No doubt there would be an investigation. Odd incidents at the school. Rumors of excess pain, of prolonged illnesses, the examination of pill bottles in medicine chests.

Dex didn't think anyone had died, but maybe he was wrong. Probably though, what with all the ribbing the nurse took, she had simply snapped.

On his left, Jenna stirred.

Tweed cuddled against him, almost hiding her head beneath his arm. Perhaps she was reliving those awful moments at the prom, and the death of her father. Dex would have to soothe her tonight, to assure her that she was safe in his arms and adored to the max.

But Tweed's kid sister squirmed in a most delightful fashion at his thigh. As he watched her take in each speaker in the room, Dex could feel the tension in her body.

Jenna was a pert thing, a little more compact than Tweed but otherwise a knock-off of her.

And a knock-out.

Dex mused.

Sister-wives were not unheard of.

Jenna was currently nursing a crush on the sprightly Pish Balthasar and on Bo Meacham, a hot-shot quarterback with nothing but brawn and looks to recommend him.

Maybe after her prom, she would wise up and gaze upon her brother-in-law in a new way.

Dex hoped so.

But he thought it best to let that unfold on its own. It was inconceivable to bring it up with her. Maybe he could plant a seed in Tweed's ear, letting sisterly magic weave its gossamer web.

Shame on him!

With all the upset and outrage sweeping through Mr. Versailles' living room, here *he* was firmly focused on lust.

Maybe Tweed would chastise him tonight.

He loved their Private Flogger.

And he was glad it made such a racket, the buzz-build, the *thwap!*

Jenna, down the hall from their bedroom, was most likely listening, lying there stroking her lovelobe. Most likely, she had Pish and Bo on her mind as she stroked, but maybe not, maybe not.

He could dream, couldn't he?

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Tweed clung to Dex.

She missed her father's melodious voice.

At first, her house had seemed empty without him. But Dex's love for her had so filled it, and so filled her heart, that the ache of her father's death had lost its edge in recent months.

Jenna's presence helped too.

Their sisterly rivalry, always minor, had vanished completely in the sudden maturity prom night had brought on.

Jenna had recently taken up with Bo Meacham, whose outsized nose and dorkish grins were more than offset by his dropdead looks and a stellar career this year as lead quarterback. She had dropped hints to Tweed, snickering over popcorn while Dex was off hitting the bars with his work buddies, that noselength, at least in Bo's case, did indeed nicely correspond to genlength.

But more important to Tweed was her sister's near-certain crowning as prom queen. Next spring, the designated slasher's victim would come as usual from the pool of the non-exempt, a pool which would *not* include Jenna.

Proper protocol would be observed at Corundum High. Mr. Buttweiler would see to it. No doubt, the entire Demented States of America would tune in that night to witness the restoration of order in Corundum, Kansas.

Pillowed on Dex's thigh on the floor, Jenna was following intensely the how-shall-we-kill-her debate which filled the living room.

Tweed watched a lightbulb struggle to go on in her sister's head. Later, she swore she heard the tinny tinsel clink of the pullchain as Jenna's eyes lit up.

"Wait! I've got it!" she said, interrupting a savage suggestion from Jonquil Brindisi. Jenna had always been bold with adults. "We mustn't rip her apart. Not quickly. Not slowly. Not with drops of acid steaming pain into her wounds. Not with starved, rabid rats dangling within a jaw's bite of her flesh. Nope! We've got to keep her skin intact!"

A razor stropped in Miss Brindisi's voice. "The woman deserves slow dismemberment." End of argument.

Had Jenna already taken her course in the greater vices? Yes. Tweed remembered the B+ on her sister's report card the winter before. No reprisals were possible from that quarter.

"Jonquil," said Mr. Buttweiler, "let's hear what Jenna has to say, shall we?"

"She's a real pistol," whispered Tweed to Dex, who nodded and squeezed her hand.

Jenna's prodigious zest, her zeal when she latched onto the meat of an idea, was a favorite topic of conversation between them. That, even more than Jenna's beauty, explained her popularity.

"*Here's* how we'll kill her!"

Tweed observed the others as Jenna talked.

Trilby and Brest, torn by warring emotions, nodded with enthusiasm as her plan unfolded. Miss Phipps' eyes saucered behind her gold wire rims. Futz Buttweiler's eyebrows looked like a couple of fat caterpillars working overtime at pushups. Claude Versailles and his formerly homeless lovers were utterly enthralled by Jenna's words.

Even Jonquil Brindisi's defiance softened to neutrality there in that armchair. Her sips grew more deliberate, her body shifting in what Tweed suspected was growing arousal.

"Once she's dead," said Jenna, "we'll have her fluxidermed. Her body will be on display just inside Corundum High's front door. Kids'll get to paint her. Or scrawl graffiti on her. Or maybe do some other stuff the prom committee thinks up or approves. But nobody's allowed to steal her. And no one can, like, remove her arms or legs or anything, because everyone will understand what her role at the prom will be and just be *dying* of anticipation all year."

Jonquil Brindisi's long legs dandled against one another as she leaned forward.

"Her role at the prom?" she asked.

Ms. Brindisi's friendship lobe blushed with bloodlust, her lovelobe's gray-paisley bag seeming to throb with a stung-thumb swelling.

Tweed's pride in Jenna flowered as her plan spilled out with renewed energy. The living room, once solemn, was now abuzz with fresh dreams of collective revenge. Jenna's stunning imagination pictured the gym, months in the future.

She showed them, all of them, how it would be on that terror-filled night.

Where precisely the slaughtered couple would pillow their heads.

And how the climax of the evening would at last put the community's anguish—and the anguish of an entire nation—to rest.



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