

The World Turned Upside Down

Book 6 of *A Well-Lived Life 3*

by Michael Loucks

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I. Who Was That Man?

December 24, 2002, Christmas Eve, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"MOM!" I screamed. "MOM! COME QUICK! IT'S DAD! HE FAINTED!"

I'd seen him sag to the floor, and he was leaning against the jamb, with some strange guy asking him if he was OK. I hurried over to Dad and he looked dazed. A few seconds later, both my moms came running to the foyer along with everyone else.

"Kara, get my bag from our room! Quick!" Mom said to Mom.

Mom dashed away and up the stairs.

"Steve?" my mom the doctor said to Dad. "Steve!"

"Sir, what happened?" Suzanne asked the guy at the door.

"I'm not sure," the guy said. "I was talking to him, he turned pale, sagged, and slid down along the frame of the door.

"What did you say?!" Mom the doctor demanded.

"I'm not sure I should share it with anyone else," he said.

"I'm OK, Jess," Dad said, sounding a bit weak and groggy.

"I'll decide that!" Mom the doctor said fiercely.

"I can stand," Dad said, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Don't you dare!" Mom the doctor said fiercely.

My other mom came back with the black doctor's bag and Mom the doctor took out her stethoscope and blood pressure cuff and checked on dad. She said his pulse was 80, which was high, and his blood pressure was 80/50, which was low, even for him. I remembered what Grandpa Al and Doctor Mary had said, and in a couple minutes, both those would change, and his pulse would be in the low 60s and his BP up to 90/60.

"Jess, it's clearing," Dad said. "Help me up and to my study. Ask Mr. Samet to come in. I'll explain after I talk to him."

"What happened?" Mom the doctor demanded to know.

"Not now, Jess," Dad said. "I'm fine."

"No, you are not!" Mom said fiercely. "You had a syncopal episode! You haven't had one in a long time."

"I know," Dad replied. "Can we move inside and close the door, please? And invite Mr. Samet in."

My moms helped Dad stand up and move inside, and the stranger stepped into the house. I closed the door behind him, and look suspiciously at him, wondering what he'd said to Dad that had caused Dad to have what Mom called a 'syncopal event'.

"I can walk to my study," Dad said. "Please, this is very important and I have to speak to Mr. Samet alone."

"He's serious, Jess," Mom said. "Maybe you should let him?"

"Do I tell you how to handle polymer experiments?" Mom snapped at Mom.

"Jess, please," I said. "I need to do this. It's critically important."

"What's more important than your health?"

"Nothing, but I'm home, you're here, and Mr. Samet will call you if there's a problem. Please, Jess."

"Mom, I think we should," Albert interjected. "It has to be very important, or he'd listen to you."

Mom fumed, but she was outnumbered, and eventually we walked Dad to his study, and Albert brought Mr. Samet in. Once they were both sitting in the big leather chairs, I offered tea or coffee, but they both declined and everyone left the room, closing the doors behind us.

 Steve

"Are you OK?" Steve Samet asked once we were sitting in my study.

"I have a minor medical condition and one of the ways it manifests is syncopal episodes -- fainting spells. My wife is a trauma surgeon and is obviously concerned, but doctors at Mayo, Johns Hopkins, and Karolinska in Sweden don't believe it's life-threatening. It happens when my blood glucose is around what is normal for most people and I receive shocking information."

"I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have just blurted that out, but you were suspicious and I suspected you were about to send me away."

"I was. You're going to have to explain how you ended up here, and not at my dad's house."

"Because the only document my private investigator has found so far with his name on it, along with an address, is this house. We found a marriage license in Los Angeles, but it was a dead-end because there were no property records with his name in California."

It dawned on me just then that literally everything was either in my mom's name as Judy Deye, or if my dad *had* to put his name on something, he'd used 'Ray Deye'. And I knew he'd used corporations, such as X&B Investment Corporation, to keep his name off many things. I wondered, then, why he'd allowed his name on the deed to the house. That was an interesting question to ask in the future.

"You're going to have to explain how we get from point A to point B," I said.

"Do you believe me?"

"I don't disbelieve you," I replied. "I need more information to evaluate your claim."

"I was born out of wedlock in January 1950 to Marion Fitz and Lewis B. Hano. They married in September of that year. They divorced when I was around five and my mom married Gilbert Samet, and my surname was changed. I don't remember much about my birth dad, and Mom wasn't interested in helping me find him, so I started with what I knew -- his name and birthdate, and his New York residence. So little is stored in computers, so it took quite a bit of work in archives, but eventually the investigator found enough information to connect Lewis B. Hano with Lewis B. Tobias.

"His name was changed from Tobias to Hano when his mother, our grandmother, remarried, though there is quite a bit we can't figure out. There is some evidence he was in an orphanage at some point. We also found that our grandfather married our grandmother about two months after his first wife died of Spanish Flu, and our dad, if you'll allow me to call him that, was born five months later."

"Oops."

"Yeah. Anyway, I tracked down some military records, but then everything disappeared, and there was no record at all of Lewis B. Hano anywhere. The investigator found some tenuous link between a man named Ray Adams and Lewis Hano, and when birthdates, birthplaces, and other information lined up, and through the internet site ancestry.com, he finally found the marriage certificate in Los Angeles County, along with your birth certificate and that of your brother. I guess you have a sister, too."

And he didn't find hers in Los Angeles County because she was born in Palm Springs, which was in Riverside County. Remembering that triggered a memory of my first NASCAR race at Riverside Raceway. I quickly pushed that aside and concentrated on the topic had hand.

"If all of that is true," I said, "then you know my mom's name, and should have been able to track her down. Or my brother."

"The PI said that despite searching, he found zero references to 'Ray Adams' in any public records, and wasn't sure where he might have landed, or if he was still married. Because that was a dead end, he followed your trail, which was easy. He found you in Chicago, and turned up the deed for this house, which actually has your dad's name on it. The PI called me with the information

yesterday, and I drove down from Michigan to see you face-to-face. Had that not worked, we'd have followed your brother's trail."

Which, if they could search criminal records, would have led him directly to my dad, as Jeff still lived at home.

"I'm going to guess you have a report from the PI that documents everything you just told me?"

"Yes."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but what exactly do you want?" I asked.

"Nothing other than to meet my dad. If I could have done it without disturbing you, I would have."

"And the rest of your family?"

"Estranged," Mr. Samet said. "I haven't seen my stepdad or my mom in over twenty years, nor my siblings."

"You'll pardon me if I find this all a bit far-fetched."

"And yet, your tone and demeanor say you think what I'm saying might be credible, and you're trying to decide what to do."

"If what you say is true, it paints a very different picture of my dad than the one he's related to me, but more importantly, what he told my mom. If all of this turns out to be true, it could blow apart my parents' marriage. Is it that important to you?"

"If you were in my shoes, what would YOU do?" he asked.

"That's a damned good question," I replied. "I suspect I wouldn't be able to let it go. When was the last time you saw your dad?"

"Around 1953, or about ten years before you were born, because he and my mom separated. But you know what makes me certain?"

"No."

"Both our names are the same, albeit with alternate spelling."

"Which names?" I asked.

"You don't know?" he asked.

"Know what?"

"Your birth certificate originally read 'Steven Marc' but was corrected to 'Stephen Mark' about two months after you were born.

And with that, I knew he was right. There was no doubt in my mind.

"I didn't know that, but my Social Security Card, which was issued when I was a baby, something extremely rare in those days, had my name spelled 'M-A-R-C'. I had the SSA correct it a few years ago, to match my birth certificate."

"It was 'Steven Marc' there, too, but changed about the time your birth certificate was changed. They obviously made an error correcting it."

"Son of a bitch," I said, shaking my head. "You're not going to let it go, I'm sure, and figuring out where he is would be a hop, skip, and a jump now that you've confirmed my identity and his. Will you do something for me?"

"What's that?" Mr. Samet asked.

"Agree to not make this public? That is, don't link anything on ancestry.com, and don't reveal it to anyone else? If you agree, I'll see if I can arrange for you to meet my dad, and we'll find out the truth together."

"I have no reason to out him or reveal anything. When could I meet him?"

"Ultimately, it'll be up to him if he wants to meet you. If he says 'no', what will you do?"

"I suppose I have to honor that. Do you think he'll refuse?"

"I think if I set up a completely private meeting that nobody knows about but you, me, and him, there's a good chance he'll say 'yes'. I'll speak to him and see what he has to say. If he's amenable, I'll arrange a completely private meeting for the three of us."

"That would work."

"OK. Let me have your contact information, I'll speak to him today and try to set up the meeting."

"What are you going to say?"

"I suppose the best approach is to say that someone approached me with a proposition and I felt he should listen to it. A bit of subterfuge, but I think he'll forgive me for that. If he says 'yes', I'll get some proposed dates from him and get in touch with you."

"I can accept that, and I promise no matter what happens, to not violate anyone's privacy or do anything that would wreck your parents' marriage. What will you tell your wife?"

It wasn't 'wife', it was 'wives', which presented an interesting set of challenges, as did telling my daughter. I didn't like keeping secrets, though some had to be kept. I trusted my wives, but this information was like a container of nitroglycerin, and one small bobble might set it off.

"That's tricky, and I'm not sure. I need to think about it."

"I'll leave you, because I want to get back to Michigan."

"I'm somewhat surprised you traveled on Christmas Eve."

"You don't know that, either?"

It dawned on me, and was something I'd speculated about, and now I knew.

"You're Jewish, and so was your Dad."

"Yes."

"You just clarified something I suspected, at least based on the family name."

"Our grandfather was Jewish, and our great grandparents on our grandmother's side were Russian Jews who emigrated."

"Damn!" I said, shaking my head.

"What?"

"I have a number of Russian friends, many of them made before the Berlin Wall came down, and I never had an inkling I might have Russian blood."

"You're a true believer now?" Steve Samet asked.

"So many little things add up that did not add up before. I'm curious, but did you uncover anything about his military service or work for a government agency?"

"He was mustered out of the Naval Reserves in 1952, and his last assignment we can find was USS *Biddle*. As for government agencies, by which I'm sure you mean the CIA, that was the speculation the investigator made based on complete disappearance of records and not finding ANY records for Ray Adams or Lewis Hano between 1953 and 1961."

Dad had never mentioned *Biddle* and I wondered if that was part of some OSS subterfuge, or information I simply didn't have because Dad hadn't told me the whole story.

"I know some other details that fit," I said. "He met my mom in Las Vegas in 1961 and was there because he was friends with Cuban expatriates. I also met a man who met my dad in Cuba and knew him as Lewis B. Hano. So if we add our two stories together, I think that part is as he said. But the 1950s are a complete blank in everything I know, and allegedly he worked for the OSS, then the CIA."

"He had a TV business in New York after the war."

"I'm positive you made THAT connection?"

"Which?"

I laughed, "What are my dad's initials?"

"Oh crap!" Steve Samet exclaimed with a smile. "I missed that one! RCA!"

"Yeah," I replied with a smile of my own.

"I'll leave you to your holiday celebration. I'm assuming you're Christian?"

"Agnostic. Let me walk you out."

"Was the second blonde my half-sister?"

"No," I replied, hoping he'd drop it.

"OK. You're obviously being circumspect, and I get that, so I won't press. I very much appreciate you talking to me and being honest with me, and I've very sorry about causing you to faint."

"It's OK," I said. "I'm not sure it could have been avoided."

We got up, I walked him to the door, shook hands and walked to the sunroom and suppressed a sigh.

"Hi, Al," I said. "I'm fine."

"I'll be the judge of that! Your study, now!"

Fighting Al would only make things worse with Jessica, so I complied, and we went to my study where Al did a much more through exam.

"So?" I asked.

"Your vitals are in the normal range for you. Did you eat carbs this morning?"

"No. I had a few, and I mean few, last night in San Francisco because I was in the Admiral's Club and the selection was limited. I took propranolol proactively, and I slept fairly well on the red eye back to Chicago."

"Define 'few'."

"An apple with my first meal of cold cuts and cheese, with a slice of whole grain bread, that was around 5:00pm. Then around 9:00pm, a banana, cold cuts, cheese, and a slice of whole grain bread. No soda, no desserts, no candy, no cookies. Only water to drink, though I didn't drink anything on the flight because I slept, so I might be a bit dehydrated. I did drink water and a mug of tea with my breakfast of bacon and eggs."

"That's the complete truth?" Al asked.

"Yes. I followed my diet strictly in San Francisco. I even passed on the fantastic bread that Ruth's Chris serves, and had a double order of broccoli, substituting for the potatoes. I also had a decent amount of exercise."

"Then what in the seven hells caused you to have a syncopal episode?"

"Al, I can't share that," I said firmly.

"Who was that guy you just walked out?"

"His name is Steve Samet, and I just met him today. I can't tell you more."

"Why not?"

"Answering that would tell you more. I honestly cannot say."

"Steve, you know me," Al said. "I won't judge and I won't violate your privacy."

"If I tell you, you cannot repeat this to a single person, ever. I mean that. You can't even mention it to me unless I bring it up first."

"What the hell?" he asked.

"Do you agree?"

"Yes. Call it doctor-patient confidentiality because it caused a medical incident."

"Barring a deception worthy of the KGB or MI6 on their best days, the man who was just here is my half-brother."

"What?!" Al asked, his face showing extreme surprise.

"You heard me," I said. "Everything lines up and it appears my dad was married in the early 1950s, and had kids, at least one out of wedlock, under the name he said he used in Cuba, which, by the way, Felipe confirmed."

"You're sure this guy isn't some kind of fraudster?"

"Positive? No. But so much lines up."

"Out of wedlock?"

"He was born in January 1950 and my dad married his mom in September of that year."

"How did he link the names?"

"Something an investigator found on the website ancestry.com, which has old records, with more being added each day. Somehow he linked the names, then

traced the scarce facts to find my parents' marriage certificate. He couldn't find my dad because, well, of things I know about my dad, which I can't share. The investigator found my birth certificate, then found me, and found my dad's name on the deed, so Mr. Samet was sure he had come to the right place."

"I think I can see why you had an episode! What are you going to do?"

"If my dad agrees, set up a meeting for Thursday, and let my dad decide what to do after that. Maybe the guy is a fraudster, but if so, the story he spun won't help because if he isn't my dad's son, my dad will say so. Also, how hard would it be to actually track down my dad now that he knows where I live, and simply needs to trace my history, or locate my brother? The company website gives my bio and refers to Milford and Cincinnati, and names my dad as an investor and member of the Board, but with only basic details. Given that, how long do you think it would take someone to find my brother, who still lives with my parents?"

"Why didn't he go directly to your dad?"

"Everything was always in my mom's maiden name, or as 'Ray Deye'. My dad also used a corporation to hide ownership of businesses and properties. I always thought it was to keep his new identity hidden because of the CIA, but now I wonder."

"You think he was hiding from the previous family?"

"I don't know," I replied. "That's the key -- I don't know. But at this point, I'm basically forced to do something because inaction is worse than action. Fundamentally, if I do nothing, Steve Samet will absolutely try to get in touch with my dad. I'd rather have that meeting in a situation I can control than have him show up at my dad's door in the next few weeks."

"What's your plan?"

"The more I think about it, the more I think I should tell my dad what I know, rather than surprise him."

"That is probably best, rather than create a possible confrontation. If your dad refuses, for whatever reason, will this man drop it?"

"He claimed he would, but I obviously don't know him well enough to know for sure."

"What does your famous gut say?"

"That Steve Samet is trustworthy."

"Next question -- assuming your dad says 'no', are *you* going to stay in touch with this man and try to put together your dad's entire history?"

"I don't know, Al. One step at a time, OK?"

"Sorry."

"It's OK. Will you tell Jessica I'm fine? She'll believe you. I'll still have the problem of not disclosing anything."

"That's a hell of a secret to keep, if it's true."

"I know. Given you know, do me a favor, and use the subterfuge of the exam to let me call my dad and see what he wants to do. At least then I'll have an idea if I can share this knowledge with anyone else while my mom is still alive."

"Make your call."

I nodded, went to my desk and dialed my parents' house in Mason. Thankfully, Dad answered.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, Son. Aimee confirmed she'll deliver us to Meigs at 8:00am on Thursday."

"Great! We're looking forward to seeing you. I do have a question to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Do you know a Steven Marc Hano, son of Lewis Hano and Marion Fitz?"

There was dead silence on the other end of the line, and I knew instantly that what Steve Samet had revealed was true. Had it not been, Dad would simply have answered 'no'.

"Where did you hear those names?" he asked after about twenty seconds.

"Steven Hano, now Steven Samet, showed up at my door an hour ago, looking for Ray Adams, whose name is on the deed to this house, and who he had, through a private investigator, tied to Lewis B. Hano and Lewis Betram Tobias."

"God damn," my dad said quietly. "What did you tell him?"

"At first, when he said the names, I said I couldn't help him. When he said he was my half-brother, I had a syncopal episode. When I recovered, we spoke for about fifteen minutes. I revealed nothing about where you live or what you do, but he knew things that you told me, that I've never heard anywhere else."

"What did he want?"

"To see you. I only committed to telling you he wanted to see you. He promised that if you refuse, he'll go away. If you do want to see him, I'll set something up for Thursday."

"That part of my life no longer exists," Dad said firmly. "Nobody was ever supposed to know. Do you know where he found the information?"

"A combination of physical records searches and an internet site. It was the internet site that gave him the clue he needed to find your marriage license in California. He did try to find other, but received no information at all. I'm surmising that meant a manual records search that was fruitless, for reasons I can deduce that include using 'Ray Deye' and 'X&B Investment Corporation', as well as everything being in Mom's maiden name."

"I was afraid there were loose ends, especially after the FBI asked you about me."

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing. I can't reopen that chapter in my life without risking major fallout, and not just with your mom. There are other things you do not know."

"I figured. Is he your son?"

"Yes."

"I can tell him you won't see him, and my gut says he's trustworthy, but there are no guarantees I've read him correctly."

"There's a reason the Navy men don't want you to play in poker tournaments, Son! You are an expert at reading people."

"The stakes appear to be much bigger than a \$1500 poker payout."

"They are. Promise me two things, please."

"What's that?"

"You'll say nothing to anyone about this, and you won't go digging into my past. I will tell you more in about ten years."

"About that. One other person knows."

"Who?"

"Al Barton. He's actually here with me right now. Jess called him when I had the syncopal episode and I agreed never to withhold relevant information from Al about any health concerns. He'll classify this as doctor-patient confidentiality. He's the easy one; I'll have a heck of a time finessing it with Jess and Kara, but I will."

"No further than Al, Son. It has to stop there. Tell Mr...what was his name?"

"Samet."

"Tell Mr. Samet that he should cease and desist. Use whatever language you think will work. And you forget everything you heard."

"You know that's not possible. May I ask one question?"

"One, but I may not be able to answer now."

"Your maternal grandparents were Russian Jews who emigrated to the US?"

"Yes. And yes, I'm Jewish. Well, ethnically, anyway."

"Thanks. I'd say this matter is closed for discussion until sometime in 2011, when fifty years have passed."

"Thank you, Son. Do your best to convince Mr. Samet that I don't, and can't, know him, and do not want any contact."

"I'll do what I can, Dad. See you Thursday."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"I infer he asked you not to say anything," Al observed. "And asked you to find a way to make this man understand he's not welcome?"

"Yes," I replied. "My problem, of course, is my natural curiosity is going to eat at me, and my dad asked for a promise that I won't dig into his past."

"I didn't hear you promise anything."

I smiled, "I actually didn't, directly, but I believe I implied it strongly enough for him to infer my compliance."

"You didn't give your word, which is what matters for you. May I give my perspective as someone who had serious complications in his life and kept them hidden?"

"Yes."

"The truth eventually comes out, and it's much better if you can manage it than allow it to manage you."

He had a point, given all the things that had happened with Jessica and him when the truth had come out inadvertently.

"Thanks, Al. That's what I needed to hear."

"What are you going to tell Jessica?" he asked.

"Hell if I know," I sighed. "Later today, I'll give Mr. Samet a call and give him what I'm sure will be unwelcome news."

"Let me know if I can help. I won't say anything to your dad unless he says something to me."

"Thanks, Al. Just make sure you give me a clean bill of health with Jess. Mary and Don will be here on Thursday, so I'm sure Jess will insist Mary thoroughly examine me."

"In your dreams, Kid!" Al replied with a grin.

"Been there, done that," I replied flatly.

"You dog!" he chuckled.

"Before she met Don."

"I assumed. Let me talk to Jess while you formulate your strategy."

He left the room, barely avoiding Birgit, who scurried in.

"Are you OK, Dad?" Birgit asked, looking and sounding very concerned.

"I'm fine, Pumpkin. Grandpa Al is going to tell your mom the doctor that I'm OK."

"She said she's going to have Doctor Mary give you a complete physical!"

"I'll mark that spot on my Jessica bingo card," I chuckled. "I assumed."

"What happened?" Birgit asked. "Who was that man?"

"Someone trying to locate somebody, but not me. As for what happened, it was a combination of limited sleep, atypical meals, my body reacting to having taken a dose of propranolol yesterday, and something surprising. Don't worry about it, Pumpkin. Everything is fine and I'm not in any trouble."

"Are you sure?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I promise. Now, shoo, because here come my wives."

She glared at me but left the room when Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne came in, with Suzanne shutting the door behind them.

"Who was that man?" Jessica asked.

"I can't say," I replied. "I am not in any trouble, but I cannot reveal who he is or what he said."

"I know his name, Tiger. I bet I can find out."

"Jess, seriously, you need to let it go, please."

"No. You're hiding something that caused a syncopal event. You *will* tell me."

"I simply can't," I said.

"No," Jessica said sternly, and sounding annoyed, "you *can*, but you *won't*."

"We can split whatever hairs you want, Babe, but I simply can't say. And please do not try to find out anything. This has literally nothing to do with any of you, and, under the circumstances, nothing to do with me beyond being asked to convey a message."

"To whom?"

"Jess, he's not going to say because he gave his word," Kara said. "I'm positive that's the only reason he'd remain silent. We simply have to trust him that there is no risk to him or to any of us."

"He had a syncopal event!" Jessica protested. "We need to know what caused it."

"The content of the message I was asked to convey," I replied. "That's all."

"Why you?"

"Answering that would violate the confidence," I replied. "As I said to Birgit, and to Al, it was a combination of limited sleep, atypical meals, my body reacting to having taken a dose of propranolol yesterday, and something surprising."

"You ate carbs," Jessica said flatly.

"I had limited access to food in the Admiral's Club after the flight was delayed. As I said to Al, I had an apple with my first meal of cold cuts and cheese, with a slice of whole grain bread that was around 5:00pm. Then around 9:00pm, a banana, cold cuts, cheese, and a slice of whole grain bread. No soda, no desserts,

no candy, no cookies. Only water to drink, though I didn't drink on the flight, so I might be a bit dehydrated.

"Why would you eat bread?"

"Because there were limited options," I replied. "I didn't feel manic, I slept on the plane, something I generally never do, and I followed my diet in San Francisco, along with walking quite a bit."

"Steve, are you positive there's no threat to our family?" Suzanne asked.

"There is no threat to anyone here at the Compound, nor to Elyse and her kids, nor to my sister and her family, nor to NIKA, nor to the dojo."

"He's not an irate father?" Jessica asked.

"No. I haven't really run into one of those since High School when Kara went home with wet hair!"

All three wives laughed.

"No irate fathers here about *you*, anyway," Kara observed. "Jesse, on the other hand..."

"The irate grandmother was the bigger problem," I replied. "The upset dads complained about the sauna, and there was no sex."

"That you know of!" Kara tittered.

"I trust Jesse to tell me the truth," I replied. "Though without names or details."

"Are you sure the party he and his friends are having is a good idea?" Jessica asked.

"The party? Or the sauna?"

"The sauna, obviously! Don't be difficult, Tiger!"

"Asking Steve not to be difficult is like asking Birgit to chill!" Suzanne declared.

"There might be some truth to that," I said with a grin. "In the end, it's up to Jesse. They chose not to invite any Freshmen, and according to Jesse, Luna Alonso spoke personally with each girl. I think the kids will be discreet and we need to give them the benefit of the doubt. The problem last time was one specific girl who wasn't invited who made a claim with no actual evidence that happened to be true. I think the kids will be fine."

"Did you ask Jennifer and Josie?" Kara inquired.

"Yes. And they're OK with the plans. Jesse had discussed it with them before I spoke to them, and they agree -- the kids will be discreet and we need to give them the freedom to manage their own lives. I did make it clear that nobody who isn't currently in High School could participate, because THAT is a problem we don't need, and as I said, they already excluded Freshmen."

"So Nicholas isn't invited?" Suzane asked.

"No, and Jesse spoke to him and he's cool about it. Are we OK, Jess?"

"I'm not happy, but I'm outvoted. Again."

"Jess, it's not like that," Kara countered. "It's about trusting Steve to tell us about any threats. Would you share patient information with us if we insisted? I mean names and diagnosis?"

"No, but that's...never mind. I see your point. I just don't like it because it caused Steve to have a syncopal episode."

"Steve is happy to demonstrate that he's in good health, if that interests you in any way."

Jessica laughed softly, "Of course it does, but not all of us have insane sex drives like someone in this room!"

"I make NO excuses!" Kara exclaimed. "None! But why don't you and Steve spend some time together, just the two of you? We'll all celebrate tonight, but I think you need some quality time with your Tiger."

"What do you say, Jess?" I asked.

"Come upstairs with me," she said with a smile.

 Albert

"What do we know?" Ashley asked.

She, Birgit, Stephie, and I had come up to my room after Grandpa Al said dad was OK.

"I know his name," Birgit said. "Steve Samet. We could search the internet and see if there is any information.

"Those 'people search' sites all cost money," I countered.

"Sure," Birgit agreed. "But we might find something."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I said. "If Dad told you to MYOB, you should."

"I think Albert is right," Stephe said.

"I agree with Birgit!" Ashley declared. "We should know who that guy is because we don't know what he might do!"

"Don't you think Dad will handle it?" I inquired. "If there was really a threat, he'd warn us. Don't you trust him to protect us?"

"Yes," Ashley admitted. "But I still think we should know what's going on. What if the guy comes back?"

"Then we get dad, or tell the guy to get lost," I said. "Birgit, please don't do anything foolish."

"Oh, please!" she protested.

"You are impetuous, Sis!" Ashley declared.

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Stephe interjected.

"HEY!" Birgit protested.

"If the shoe fits..." I said.

 Birgit

"Where's Dad?" I asked my mom when I went downstairs to the sunroom.

"With your other mom," Mom replied.

"Arguing?"

"Making up!" Mom replied with a silly smile.

"Is everything OK?"

"I think so," Mom replied.

"Do YOU know who that guy was and what he wanted?"

"No. Dad said it wasn't about anyone here or your Aunt Stephanie and her family or Elyse and her boys, but he couldn't say more."

"It's weird, Mom!"

"I agree, but I trust your dad and he says there is no danger."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Has your dad ever lied to you?"

"Well, no."

"And do you think he's ever lied to me?"

"Well, I don't know, but I don't think so."

"He hasn't," Mom said. "He's always been truthful, even about things that were difficult or uncomfortable for me or him. That was true all the way back in High School when we started dating."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Yes, and I'll answer if I can."

"When did you decide you wanted to have sex with Dad?" I asked.

Mom laughed softly, "The second he sat down next to me in Mrs. Brewer's chemistry class!"

"But you thought it was sinful, right?"

"Yes, I did, but my body had other ideas!"

I giggled, "I bet! I am your daughter, after all!"

"Yes, you are! I promise there's nothing to worry about because I trust your dad completely."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I wish you'd talk to me like this more often."

"I'll try."

 Steve

"How do you do that?" Jessica asked as we cuddled after an extremely pleasurable love-making session.

"Because I love you, Babe."

"I think you make girls feel good even if you don't love them!"

"Yes, but it's different with the ones I do; very different."

"I don't think I've been a very good wife to you."

"I disagree. First, you were clear about what you needed and wanted seventeen years ago, and I had no delusions. Second, you've given me two wonderful children who I wouldn't trade for anything in the world."

"Despite BOTH of them being aliens?" Jessica asked, interrupting me.

I chuckled, "They are quite a pair, aren't they?"

"That's one way to put it!"

"Anyway," I continued, "if you're referring to the way you respond to stress and to things you think put people at risk, I believe that was part and parcel of the bargain. I knew you were driven, and I knew your medical career would always be your primary focus. You knew it, too, which is why you said you wanted a guy who would curl your toes and look good on your arm."

"And the way I've treated you at times? And becoming estranged and needing rehab?"

"Jess, if I was under the kind of stress you are day in and day out in the ER, I'd have had a complete breakdown years ago. I honestly don't know how you do it. I have the advantage of being able to farm out most of my stress at work -- to my

sister, to Liz, and to Elyse. Sure, I get involved, but they handle the crap that always drove me nuts and stressed me out."

"But I ran away. Twice."

"And we forgave you both times. You were under a ridiculous amount of stress from work, keeping your secret, and things going on in our family. I'm not making excuses, simply acknowledging the causes, and why Kara and I completely forgave you. There's nothing wrong with our relationship from my perspective, or from Kara's or Suzanne's. They'd have said something if there were."

"And not wanting to have sex very often?" Jessica asked.

"Not to be a jerk, but it's not as if there isn't a nympho in the house!"

"Two!" Jessica smirked. "Birgit does take after her mom!"

"She does. But that's a whole different kettle of fish, as it were."

"If I hadn't put my foot down, would you have considered it?"

"It would be hard not to consider something our daughter directly requested."

"Don't be difficult now, Tiger, we're relaxed and calm."

"Sorry. I think a combination of what happened with Stephanie and what Birgit actually wanted made it impossible to consider. As I said, in a different world where Birgit was circumspect and hadn't broadcast her desire, and where she didn't want to displace you, Kara, and Suzanne, it might have happened. But that world doesn't exist, and if it did, that Birgit might never have even thought about it, let alone asked."

"Your whole bit about 'what if?' questions."

"What if I make love to you again?"

"Slow and sweet?"

"Yes."

II. Navigating A Minefield

December 24, 2002, Christmas Eve, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Late on Tuesday, just before dinner, I placed the call I promised to make.

"This is Steve Adams calling from Chicago. May I speak with Steven Samet?"

"Speaking."

"I spoke to my dad and I'll just tell you straight -- he declined to meet you."

I heard a deep sigh, then he said, "Did he give a reason?"

"He said, quite specifically, he *can't* know you, and cannot re-open that chapter of his life. He didn't provide any further details. I don't know any more than you do; actually, I knew less because I had no idea Lewis Hano was married."

"So you believe me."

"I do, but I also need to hold you to your promise to not try to contact him."

"So that's it? You don't want to know the full truth the same as I do?"

"Of course I do," I replied. "All I can say is 'wait'. If you're concerned about his age, don't be, as he's the healthiest person I know except for a bit of bursitis. Even at age eighty, I think he has at least a dozen years, if not more. My counsel is to wait and see what happens. That said, I'm not opposed to piecing things

together, so long as it doesn't go against my dad's wishes to not re-open that portion of his life."

"I have to say I'm disappointed."

"I understand. It's public now, but my wife had a similar hidden past, and the revelation caused no end of discord and strife. It subsided, eventually, but not without a lot of emotional pain and suffering. I'm sure you're hurting because of what he said, but if it's true he was in the CIA, and I have evidence to back that up, then he might be required by the Federal government to stay silent about his past."

"But *you* know."

"I only know because about ten years ago, the FBI asked me about his alternate names. I had no idea about 'Hano', but I did know his birth name. I asked him, and he revealed some information, which I'm sure he did to keep me from digging, which I absolutely would have done."

"Given all of that, what did you tell your wife?"

"Nothing. Not even the reason you were here. The only person who knows besides you, me, and my dad, is my father-in-law, and he won't say a word, even to his daughter. His advice was to manage the situation rather than allow it to manage us. I'm taking that advice."

"Which means?"

"We stay in touch, we share information, and we see what happens. I wish I could do more, but I'm not about to wreck my parents' marriage and potentially open a can of worms with the Feds. I've had enough trouble from them over the years, mainly due to my Russian friends before 1991."

"They were a bit touchy about things like that. I agree with your plan. Let me provide you with an email address, and we can share information. I won't put anything publicly on ancestry.com, but you know someone will eventually make the connections."

"At the moment, a risk we'll have to take," I replied. "I don't know that my dad will be amenable to yielding on his 2011 target. That said, if someone else does make the link and connects the records on ancestry.com for public view, I think that will force the issue. I'm going to create an account there. What's your email address?"

He gave it to me, I promised to email him, we said 'goodbye' and I hung up. I had spent some time before the call writing in my journal, which was encrypted, with Katya holding copies of my encryption keys and passphrase, so it was safe. I wondered how I might go about finding information about my Russian ancestors, given Tsarist records likely didn't exist, or were found in local villages in hard-copy form only.

That was a question for another day. The real question was if I could reveal anything more to my wife and children. They knew about my dad's birth name, his Naval service, and his CIA service, at least in a general way, and revealing that we had Russian ancestors only impacted the 'Tobias' persona, not the 'Hano' persona. Of course, Felipe Rodriguez knew my dad as 'Luís Hano', so he might actually know about my dad's other family, all things considered.

In the end, computerization of historical records was going to make it fairly easy for someone to piece things together, and Al's advice to manage the situation weighed more and more on me. If the situation was revealed by anyone other than my dad or me, it could cause significant problems with my wives, as they'd think I kept them in the dark while third parties had access to the information.

That would be doubly true if the name 'Samet' was linked to the 'Hano', 'Tobias', or 'Adams' personas.

There was, in my mind, only one thing to do. Trying to navigate the minefield would inevitably lead to something blowing up in my face, and I couldn't allow that to happen. I got up, went to the Indian room and asked my wives to join me in my study.

"What I'm about to say cannot be repeated to anyone, at any time, and cannot even be mentioned to me unless I mention it first," I said. "I need all three of you to agree to that, and then I'll reveal what happened this morning."

"Why could we not mention it to you?" Jessica asked.

"Because what I'm going to say can only be spoken about in extremely limited circumstances, and it has to stay that way, and it has to be me who decides. You'll understand once I tell you, but I can only tell you if you agree. Do you trust me, Jess?"

"Yes, I trust you, and I agree."

"Me, too," Kara confirmed.

"And me," Suzanne added.

"I'm confident what I'm about to say is true, but I'm not a hundred percent sure, nor do I know any more details than I'm going to share. The man who showed up this morning is Steven Marc Samet, born Steven Marc Hano, son of Lewis B. Hano, born Lewis Betram Tobias. He's my half-brother."

All three wives gasped in surprise.

"But..." Kara said. "No, go ahead, I'll wait until you finish."

"First, you'll note he and I are both eldest sons and both have the same name, albeit his is spelled with a 'v' not a 'ph', and Kara and Jess, you'll understand this -- his middle name is spelled with a 'c' not a 'k'."

"Your Social Security Card had that spelling!" Kara exclaimed. "Because your dad filled out that form!"

"Yes, though there's a bit more to it, but that's irrelevant at the moment. Anyway, Lewis B Hano, born Lewis Betram Tobias, married Marion Fitz in September 1950, about seven months after the first Steven Marc was born. Lewis Hano divorced Marion Fitz, and she remarried, taking her new husband's name -- Samet -- and changing the kids' names as well.

"Kids?!" Jessica asked. "As in, you have other half-siblings?"

"I know no details other than Steve Samet said 'siblings' when he described being estranged from his family. I don't know if they were 'Hano' kids or 'Samet' kids, or a mix. In any event, everything Steve Samet said lines up with what I know, though he obviously had additional information which I didn't have.

"When I called my dad, he said that he couldn't -- and didn't want to -- know Steve Samet, and that he was uninterested in reopening that chapter of his life. He did confirm something I've long suspected, and that is that he and his family were Jewish when he was 'Lewis Tobias' and 'Lewis Hano', and, more interestingly, my maternal grandmother's parents were Russian Jews who emigrated sometime before 1890."

"WOW!" Suzanne exclaimed. "So you're at least part Russian!"

"I think, based on being half-Jewish, I could move to Israel under the Law of Return, as could my kids, because they have a Jewish grandparent."

"Unbelievable!" Kara exclaimed. "Jess, I think his syncopal event is fully explained by what he just told us."

"I think so," Jessica replied, "but I still want Mary to give him a complete physical on Thursday."

"I told Al that after he examined me. He knows, because I needed advice. And it was his advice that led me to reveal everything to you."

Jessica took a deep breath, let it out, then said, "You could tell him, but not me?"

"He's one of my doctors, and he asked because he needed to know what caused the syncopal event. I love you, but you're not my physician, and can't be, because you're my wife. After I told Al, I decided to call my dad and see what he said, which was what I told you before. Then, after thinking about it for a few hours, I called Steve Samet to tell him what my dad had said. He's sad and disappointed, but he promised not to make anything public or try to get in touch with my dad."

"You're afraid of how your mom would react?" Jessica asked.

"You know how those kinds of revelations affect families, and it's why we won't see your mom or Troy tomorrow. Imagine my mom finding out that my dad had been married before he married her, and had kids, but didn't acknowledge them, for whatever reason."

"Not good," Jessica replied. "It might even be uglier than the situation with my mom, my dad, and Troy. How did you leave it with Mr. Samet?"

"How I'm sure you expect -- I'm far too curious to simply let this go, so I'll stay in touch with Steve Samet, we'll compare notes, but keep everything private, at least until 2011 when my dad says he can discuss more details."

"Will you tell the kids about their Russian ancestors?"

"At some point, but not before the grandparents all go home. I don't want questions asked that might make my dad suspicious that I shared this with anyone other than Al. Just to put a fine point on it, my dad said not to tell anyone, including the three of you. Al counseled wisdom, and I followed his counsel."

"I don't even know what to say about all of that," Kara said. "Will you try to meet anyone from that side of the family?"

"Not any time soon," I replied. "The last thing I want is someone making this public. Steve Samet is estranged and hasn't seen any of his family in two decades, so that might be part of why he's looking for his dad, and why he wanted to stay in touch with me."

There was a knock at the door and Suzanne got up to answer.

"Mom said to come get her when the cookies were out of the oven," Stephanie said.

"I think we're finished," I said. "Let's celebrate Christmas!"

"That's after dinner, Snuggle Bear!" Kara exclaimed as she got up from her chair.

"There's more to Christmas than sex under the tree!" Jessica exclaimed.

"TOO MUCH INFORMATION!" Stephanie exclaimed, turning and quickly moving away.

My wives and I all laughed, left my study, and went to the kitchen.



December 25, 2002, Christmas Day, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

As was our tradition, our extended family Christmas celebration began at 1:00pm. That allowed Jesse to attend services after celebrating with his moms; Eduardo, Elyse, and her boys, plus Chelsea, to celebrate together; Joel, my sister, and her kids to celebrate together; and Natalie to celebrate with her parents. Yuriko, as she would until she returned to Japan, celebrated with my wives and the four kids who lived with us.

A new tradition, organized by Albert and Ashley, had everyone draw names for a gift exchange, so that everyone would have a gift to open, though I also bought a gift for everyone, including my sister's family. Of course, I'd had help from Birgit, Kimmy, and Jesse, who had either suggested gifts, or, in the case of Birgit for her sisters, actually picked them out.

We began, as we always did, with Jesse reading the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel. Once he finished, Ashley, Stephie, and Patty distributed the presents from under the tree. Patty, my six-year-old niece, who looked exactly like my sister had at age seven, brought me my gift, which was from my nephew Davy, her brother, who was eight, and resembled my dad more than he did Ed Krajick.

After presents, we ate a tremendous Christmas meal prepared by Yuriko, Kara, Birgit, and Josie, and had fantastic desserts prepared by my daughters and Natalie, with Ashley, as she always did, creating a special 'dad dessert' that was made with almond flour and Stevia. When it was time to clean up, Eduardo, Joel, and I handled the duties while everyone else relaxed with coffee or tea.

At 6:00pm, Terry, Penny, and their kids joined us for the evening, and we played games and had a light meal. Around 9:00pm, the entire clan had a Christmas sauna, with Stephie and Ashley wearing one-piece bathing suits, as they had been doing since they'd started developing, something which was common for teens in Sweden. Joel had overcome his discomfort with the Adams family tradition, and hadn't balked, which I was sure was a product of being married to my sister, who was every bit as sexually liberated as Kara and Birgit.

When we finished the sauna, everyone showered, which took some time, and then the gathering broke up, leaving just the inhabitants of the house. The kids went to bed, and my wives, Yuriko, and Natalie went to the Indian room to relax and listen to music until bedtime, when all of us went upstairs.

"Natalie should have her Christmas celebration," Jessica said as we were starting to undress in our room.

"You're sure, Babe?" I asked.

"We had ours last night and this morning! Go."

"Yes, Dear," I said with faux resignation, causing my wives to laugh.

I kissed each of them 'good night', then went to the door to the room Natalie and Yuriko shared, having heard them coming up. I knocked and waited for someone to open the door, which Yuriko did a few seconds later.

"Come in, Steve-sama!"

I stepped into the room.

"Natalie, Jess suggested you might like to celebrate Christmas in the traditional way."

They had a small tree on a table, which would suffice symbolically.

"We would both like to!" Natalie said. "Make love to us, then we'll both sleep in the same bed with you."

"Is that OK with you, Yuriko-chan?" I inquired.

"Yes!" she said happily, shedding her robe and displaying her beautiful body.

Natalie did the same, and I followed suit.



December 26, 2002, Boxing Day, Chicago, Illinois

 Albert

"Hi, Grandpa!" I called out when I saw him exit Commander Aimee's plane.

"Hi, Albert!"

"Jesse is here with the van so we can take you to Grandpa Al's house. I'll help Aimee with the ground check and help tie down the plane!"

"OK," Grandpa Adams said.

"Hi, Albert!" Commander Aimee called out. "I can use your help!"

"That's what I'm here for! I know the swabbie is useless with aircraft!"

"That's COMMANDER Swabbie to you, Cadet!" Commander Fitzmaurice, Aimee's husband, growled.

"Yes, Sir!" I said gruffly and snapped a smart salute.

"Adams, quit fucking around and get your ass over here double-time!" Commander Aimee ordered.

"Aye, aye, Commander!" I grinned and made a purposefully sloppy salute.

"You're in deep trouble now, Albert," Grandpa said, laughing.

"I know, Chief!" I grinned.

I helped Aimee do her landing and ground checks, then assisted in tying down the aircraft, which we'd use on Friday to take my Grandpas on a sight-seeing tour of the Loop and Lake Michigan shore. Once everything was set, we joined Grandpa, Grandma, Elizabeth, Commander Fitzmaurice, and Jesse in the van for the ride to Grandpa Al's house, where Grandpa and Grandma Adams were staying. Commander Aimee, her husband, and daughter were staying in the room off the kitchen.

"Did you receive your new orders?" I asked Commander Fitzmaurice.

"Yes. I'm assigned to the CNO's staff as an operations officer. I've completed the sea tours necessary for command, and this will complete my shore tours. Then it's XO of a surface ship, but not a carrier, despite that's how I served my sea tours."

"Any idea what they'll give you?" Grandpa asked.

"Garbage scow!" Commander Aimee teased before he could answer.

"Love you, too, Aimee!" Commander Fitzmaurice said. "I'm hoping for a destroyer or a guided missile cruiser. Everything on the new ships is computerized, and that's my area of expertise. Well, keeping them running, anyway."

"What are you doing in the CNO's office?" Grandpa asked.

"I'll be responsible for procurement and testing of electronic equipment. Not nearly as much fun as being at sea, but you have to pay your dues."

We dropped Grandma and Grandpa Adams at Grandpa Al's house so they could get settled. Grandpa Al would bring them to the house in about two hours for our Boxing Day celebration, and Fawn, Georg, and Analise would join us as well. Gerry and his family hadn't come to Chicago this year, as they were visiting his wife's family in Oregon.

 Steve

"I'm sorry to take you away from the gathering," Dad said, "but I wanted to ask if you resolved that matter from the other day. First, though, what did Mary say?"

She and Don had arrived earlier, having flown down let the night before.

"A completely clean bill of health," I replied. "As for the matter you mentioned, he said he'd let it be, and I believe he was sincere."

"Thank you. This is the last we'll mention this matter for the near future."

"Understood."

We left my study and walked to the great room just as Robert and Allison Block, Jennifer's parents, came into the house, followed almost immediately by Tom and Jill Dolan, Josie's parents. Next were Chelsea's family -- Jennie, Kent, and Colin, who I hadn't seen in some time. They were followed by Nancy Blanchard and her husband Paul, and not long after, Jake, Joyce, Joseph, and Amelia arrived, followed by Anthony, Connie, and their son Anthony, who was two. A bit later, Hope, Roger, Tabitha, John, and Danielle came into the house, and finally, Jackson, Holly, Liz, and Julius arrived.

We had a fantastic time, with the kids all enjoying time with their grandparents, who they didn't get to see very often. My mom, surprisingly, was cordial to the other grandparents, and even spent some time in what appeared to be a friendly conversation with Allison Block. I felt that was a good sign, but it was up to my mom to make the first step with my wives and me, by agreement between the four of us.

After lunch, Michael put in the videotape of the robotics competition that Eduardo had recorded, and most of the guests chose to watch the video of Michael's team winning the competition by the skin of their teeth.

"Excellent job, Michael," my dad said to him. "Is that going to be your career?"

"I think so. Computers and robots are cool."

"Andi thinks so, too!" Chelsea teased.

"Who's Andi?" my dad asked.

"A girl who has her eyes set on Michael," Elyse said. "Michael is more interested in computers and robots!"

"That'll change!" Chelsea exclaimed. "That's Andi on the team! She's cute, likes robots and computers, and is into baseball and football."

"Where were girls like that when I was young?" Robert Block asked.

"Not putting out the way I did, Bobby Block!" Allison declared, causing everyone to laugh.

"Mom!" Jennifer exclaimed. "There are children present!"

"Yes; MY child," Allison exclaimed. "And exactly where does she think she came from?"

"That was back in the dinosaur days, right?" Albert asked with a smirk.

"Listen, Bub!" Robert Block growled.

"Ignore Albert," Aimee said. "He thinks anyone older than about twenty-five is a dinosaur!"

"You said it, Commander, not me!" Albert declared.

"I'd pack a parachute for tomorrow," I said to Albert.

"You might be right," he replied.

"Well, you two were Seniors when I was in second grade," Jennie said with a silly smile. "So Albert might be onto something!"

"You went to school together?" Al asked.

"It's worse than you suspect!" Allison replied. "Fran and Sam Mercer, though she was Fran Sorkin then; Bev Thompson, who I'm sure Steve knows, because she became Bev Vaughn; Jennie, and her future husband Jim, who died in Vietnam; Alan Blanchard and Nancy Morton, Kara's parents; Carl Woody; Don Courtney. All of us were at Milford Main in the late 50s and early 60s."

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "I didn't realize you all knew each other! I bet there are some interesting stories to tell!"

"It was around 1960!" Josie said. "How interesting could they be?"

All the named people who were there laughed.

"You might be surprised," Allison Block said with a smirk. "Even without access to the Pill, teenagers were still teenagers!"

"Something true since the first human turned thirteen," I chuckled. "Nothing changes!"

"Steve, do you know a Jonathan Kane?" Jennie asked.

"I've met him a few times," I replied. "Why?"

"His mom and I are friends from back then, too. I'm sure there are other connections."

"That's when I met Kent van der Meer," Nancy said. "Alan was a member of his church."

"Someone should collect their stories and write them," Jennifer said. "I think it would be interesting. Well, so long as they leave out ANYTHING about my mom and dad having sex!"

"Oh, stop!" I chuckled. "I know you're just taking the piss, as my British friends would say!"

"What's that mean, Dad?" Ashley asked.

"Mocking, teasing, or irreverent, especially in a sarcastic way," I replied.

"So, Albert, basically all the time?" she asked with a silly smile.

"Sod off, Seppo!" Albert said in a near perfect Yorkshire accent he'd learned while visiting Jane and her family.

They'd actually be visiting for New Year's, swinging by Chicago on their way to a holiday in Florida.

"Seppo?" Connie asked.

"Cockney rhyming slang," I replied. "It means Yankee. Yank, septic tank, Seppo."

"How rude!"

I chuckled, "I believe that's the point!"

Most everyone stayed until about 10:00pm, but we didn't have a group sauna, as there were quite a few people who would not have appreciated it. That didn't stop our family from using it before bed, though, and afterwards, my wives and I made love before falling asleep.



December 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Well, shit," I said, looking at my calendar on Friday morning.

"What's wrong?" Jessica asked.

"I forgot that Audrey and Brad will be here late this afternoon. I need to reschedule with Nadia again."

"Bummer!" Kara exclaimed.

I chuckled, "You'll have to get your cheap thrills elsewhere! Let me see if she's online."

She wasn't, so I dialed her phone number and reached an answering machine. I let her know that something had come up, and that I was very sorry, but I'd need to reschedule. I asked her to call when she had a chance and we'd find a new day to meet.

"How upset do you think she'll be?" Suzanne asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "And, honestly, that's less of a concern because the feeling I get is this is purely about sex, with no relationship and no bonding."

"Something you've begun to avoid," Jessica observed. "It's why you've turned down the medical students who are looking to bang the hot husband of an Attending for stress relief!"

"There's also our rule about the hospital," I replied. "And that is important."

"You did consider Jessica's offer of a waiver for Allyson," Kara said. "To repay the favor she did for Jessica!"

I chuckled, "I did, and she is cute, though a bit out of my preferred age range!"

"SHE'S YOUNGER THAN ME!" Jessica growled.

"But not me!" Suzanne smirked.

"He loves you, Jess, and you know it!" Kara declared. "And you even had some private time with him the other day. I'm willing to bet he didn't think you were too old then!"

"I'm teasing, of course," Jessica said. "We know Tiger's sweet spot. I will make an exception if you want one, Tiger."

"Assuming Allyson was serious about the favor, and assuming it won't cause problems at work, invite her over in January and we'll see if we click."

"That's more important for you now that it was before," Suzanne observed. "Not that you didn't do it in the past, but ever since Emilee Krueger, you've focused on the mindfuck."

"True," I agreed, "though there have been some exceptions. That said, the mindfuck is most important."

"It sounds as if your thinking has shifted somewhat," Kara interjected.

I nodded, "It has, but only in the sense of gaining clarity. I think, after the Spring Break trip, if it happens, there will be fewer new girls; in fact, I suspect new girls will be a rare exception."

"Is this some kind of reaction to what happened on Christmas Eve?" Suzanne asked.

I shook my head, "No. but the whole 'referral' bit starting up again bothers me. This isn't directed at any of you, and it's not about Allyson, or even Keiki."

"Nadia," Kara suggested.

I nodded, "I think that's the thing that helped clarify. Granted, I don't know her, which is actually part of the problem, but I get the impression that I'd simply be playing a part in a performance, and that just feels wrong. I think, in the end, my answer to her is 'no', and I'll seek out potential subversives as I always have, but after Spring Break, new girls will be few and far between."

"I notice you keep saying 'after Spring break'," Suzanne observed with a smirk.

"So sue me," I chuckled. "Only a complete idiot would pass that up!"

 Albert

"Your aircraft," Commander Aimee said once we climbed into our seats.

"My aircraft," I confirmed.

"Take us out over the lake, then along the lakefront, as far south as Gary and as far north as Milwaukee. I'll only take over if you ask me to or there's an emergency."

"Albert flying IS an emergency," Grandpa Al teased.

"He's a natural," Commander Aimee said. "Smooth, calm, cool, and collected. If he can get jets, he'll end up at Top Gun."

"If he does a low pass by the tower, they'll put him in the brig!" Grandpa Adams said.

"Nah, he's only interested in a low pass over his Yorkie!" Grandpa Al said.

"When will you see her?" Commander Aimee asked.

"On Tuesday," I replied. "They're in Chicago for New Year's, then going to Florida. Excuse me, I need to get us on our way."

I triggered the radio, requested taxi clearance, which I received. I followed the procedures, released the brakes, and taxied to the end of the runway. I stopped, asked for clearance, and was told to hold for traffic, then a minute later was cleared to take off. I brought the engine up to speed, checked all the gauges and controls, and seeing everything was set or reading correctly, I released the brakes.

"Rolling," I said.

I followed the usual takeoff procedure, and the plane lifted into the air.

"Very smooth," Aimee said as the plane climbed away from Meigs Field. "Good enough to pass your licensing exam."

"Thank you."

I switched on the new GPS unit Aimee had installed, but only used it as a check on my navigation by landmarks and compass. We flew the route Aimee had filed, as I couldn't file my own flight plan, taking us as far south as Gary and as far north as Milwaukee, before we returned to Meigs and I received landing clearance.

"Excellent landing!" Aimee said when we touched down. "Easy pass."

I taxied to the ramp, found our slot, and stopped the aircraft. We performed our final checks, tied the plane down, then headed back to the house.

 Jesse

"Hi!" Scarlett exclaimed when she walked out of the secure area at Midway early on Friday afternoon.

"Hi!" I said, as we exchanged a quick hug. "Did you check a bag?"

"No. I'm going home on Tuesday, and we're just hanging out, so I could fit what I needed in my carry-on."

I took her bag, slung it over my left shoulder, then took her hand, and we left the terminal to head to the parking garage.

"I never asked, but what's the scoop with the party tomorrow?" Scarlett inquired.

"It's guys from the hockey team and girls from the softball team. Dad gave us the run of the main house, and everyone will be out except Yuriko, who won't bother us. My moms will be around, but won't bother us, either. We'll dance, play games, and do the usual party stuff, plus a sauna."

"Everyone wearing bathing suits, though, right?"

"No. Naked."

"How many people?" Scarlett asked.

"Thirty. We didn't invite any Freshmen, which eliminated about a quarter of both teams, and didn't invite anyone we felt was either prudish or who might publicize."

"And you expect me to be naked in front of all your High School hockey buddies?"

"Expect? No. You're invited, of course, but nobody is required to participate."

"And a bunch of High School girls are going to be naked in front of a bunch of guys, just like that?"

"Just like that," I replied.

"Is there *anything* about your life that isn't crazy?" Scarlett asked, sounding slightly frustrated.

"No. Honestly, it's up to you, and I won't be upset or bothered either way."

"But you want me to."

"I want you to do what you feel comfortable doing," I replied. "If you don't want to, that's fine. I'm comfortable doing it, it's something I've done before, and being naked in the sauna is normal for all of us."

"And that's something you'll do with your family?"

"You mean when I eventually get married? Probably. I don't agree with my dad on everything, but mostly he has the right attitude and approach."

"OK to ask where you disagree?"

"I want to marry one person, have kids, and be together as a couple for life. That didn't work for Dad, which is how he ended up in his current situation."

"What do you mean when you say it didn't work?"

"I obviously don't know all the details, but Mom One has said that the only time my dad's life was stable was when there was a trio of girls fulfilling different roles. It wasn't about sex, though he mostly had sex with them, but not always, because for a time, his sister filled the 'confidante' role. I also know Aunt Kara has her own needs, and the two of them found Aunt Jess, and, as Mom One predicted, they finally found Suzanne as the permanent third."

"And the girlfriends?"

"It's more complicated than that," I said. "Dad's relationships are complex, and sex is only part of it, and not the most important part. I explained about our Hangouts and Dad's Philosophy Club. The way dad bonds with people emotionally and spiritually nearly always leads to sex, but it's a symbol of the bond, not the bond, if that makes sense."

"And you?"

I chuckled, "A red-blooded American teenager! I like sex and don't see the point in forming a permanent relationship until I'm ready to settle down, which is likely four or five years from now. People change so much in High School and college that you can't really know them until around age twenty-two, or even a bit older after they've started working."

"I know that might sound like an excuse, but it's true. According to Mom One, Dad basically had a major reset the Summer before his Senior year at IIT. His friend Karin -- a girlfriend at that time -- pointed out that their relationship was a teenage fantasy, and that actually prevented them from having an adult

relationship. They were still close, but had grown apart. She forced a reset, and that helped Dad finally clarify things.

"And as much as I loved Francesca, I think that's where we were headed as well. I've changed a lot in the past two years, and will change more in the next six. Sure, people never stop changing, but High School and college are when you figure out who you are and set the course for your life. that's the fundamental reason for not wanting a committed relationship at the moment."

"And it lets you get laid as much as you want with no limits."

"Except there are limits," I countered. "And I'm learning about relationships and doing my best to discover what I need in a life partner. Girls do the same thing, and depending on their views, sex can be part of it or not. Be honest, please -- do you know exactly what you want from your life partner?"

"If I say 'you', you'll be upset."

"No, I won't be upset, I'll simply say that I'm not ready to make that kind of commitment. I like you a lot, but I'm also only sixteen. I'll be seventeen in February, and I have one more year of High School after this one, then four years of college. I won't be the same person when I graduate from UW Madison that I am now, and you won't be the same person when you graduate in two-and-a-half years.

"For you, the changes might be more subtle or less extreme, because you're twenty, but they could also be huge. Mom One didn't come out as lesbian until she was twenty, which is a pretty huge change, and didn't decide not to marry my dad until she was twenty-one, which was pretty earth-shattering for him."

"He expected a lesbian to marry him?!"

"Remember, they were boyfriend and girlfriend and planned a future together, and they made me *after* Mom One came out. High School and college were mostly a mess for Mom One until she met Mom Two at Stanford. I know that seems like an extreme case, but my point is, people change. And yes, they change all the time, but as I said before, High School and college are the most volatile times."

We reached the car, I put Scarlett's bag in the back seat, we got in, and I started the car.

"What you say makes sense," Scarlett said as I backed out of the parking spot. "But I can't change how I feel."

"And I'm not asking you to," I replied. "I'm simply saying what's possible."

"I know. I plan to get my Master's at UW Madison, which would be when you start your Sophomore year. They have a great program and that would give us a chance to be together more."

"And there's a strong probability that plan will work, at least in terms of seeing each other more. What happens beyond that, nobody can predict."

I stopped to pay the parking fee, then pulled out onto Cicero Avenue.

"Please don't take this the wrong way," Scarlett said, "but I suppose it's my fault for falling for a guy in High School who is chronologically three years younger, but acts more like someone who is even older than I am."

"Do you regret what happened during hockey camp?"

"No! It was exactly what I wanted and needed. It's just...I fell in love with you. You don't feel the same way, do you?"

"I think the only thing I can say is that I really like you, want to keep seeing you, and believe what you want is *possible*, but I don't want you to misunderstand me. It's also the case that love is more complex than most people think. I don't remember discussing it with you, but in Greek, there are six main words for 'love' and they all have different nuances. Saying 'I love you' often has very different meanings for people, even if they don't realize it. It's all based on using a single word to convey different types of love. That's why I'm not saying it -- I don't want you to misunderstand."

"I don't. I think I know what you mean and how you feel. I also think all I can do is what I'm doing, and hope for the best."

That's all any of us can ever do," I confirmed.

III. Elements of a Contract

December 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Ugh!" I groused at seeing the arrival board. "Delayed!"

"That's not uncommon," Natalie, who had driven me to O'Hare on Friday afternoon in Dad's BMW, observed.

"No, but I checked the SAS website AND called to make sure it was on time! They said it was, and that was only an hour ago!"

"I hate to break it to you, but the universe does not bend to the will of the self-styled Her Royal Highness, Birgit the First of Kenwood!"

"Well, it should!" I declared.

"According to you and every *other* teenage girl on the planet! But given you all don't agree who should control the universe, we get chaos!"

"Loki is a dick!" I growled.

Natalie laughed, "You and your dad love him, even when you complain about him, because he makes your lives interesting!"

"Maybe," I allowed. "I wish they'd put on the board how long the delay is going to be."

"Patience, Grasshopper!" Natalie replied. "You do need to learn to relax."

"Don't you ever get impatient?"

"I used to, but not since I met your dad. Of course, you're just as impatient with him as with anything else that doesn't go the way you want!"

"WHAT-EVER!"

"May I say one more thing?" Natalie asked.

"What?"

"Instant gratification isn't always a good thing, even though you think it is. Toddlers demand instant gratification; mature adults do not."

"HEY!" I protested.

"If the shoe fits..." Natalie said with a smile. "And you know what?"

"What?"

"You know I'm right."

I scowled at her because she *was* right, I just didn't want to admit it. I took a couple of breaths and let them out slowly, then decided to ask her about something she'd said.

"What did you mean about meeting my dad?"

"That's when I became an adult," Natalie said. "And wipe that smirk off your face, young lady, because it wasn't about that!"

I giggled, "It's *always* about that with Dad!"

"If you're not teasing or joking, you're wrong. Yes, of course, that happened, but it happened *after* he taught me how to think and act like an adult by treating me as an adult. And, despite your impetuosity, he treats *you* as an adult, with all the privileges and responsibilities that come with that. But that doesn't mean you aren't still a teenager who has limited life experience, whose body is changing every day, and who is on hormone overload!

"Remember, every other teenager is in the same situation, but your dad gives you the freedom to explore and experiment that I never had. I was still being treated like a pre-teen when I met your dad in Russia. All he did was treat me the way he treats you, Jesse, and your siblings. Yes, that led to going to bed together, but that was a symbol of what had already happened."

"You think I'm a little kid?" I asked.

Natalie smiled, "You're a teenager! It's a transition time, and you're fortunate that your dad is fully behind the transition, as opposed to how some parents you know behave."

"You're interfering with a good snit!" I protested.

Natalie laughed, "I bet you say that to your dad at times."

"Maybe," I replied, but my tone clearly implied 'yes'.

"May I point out something which might upset you?"

"Could I stop you?" I asked.

Natalie smiled, "Yes; I'm not Jesse!"

I laughed, "I love him anyway."

"I know. What I'm going to point out is that your trouble with boys is that you're impetuous. If you were a boy, I'd say you were thinking with the wrong head. But thinking with your clit it just as bad as thinking with your glans."

"You think I do that?"

"Be honest, Birgit."

"Maybe I do sometimes."

"Yes, and that's what has led to your difficulties with boys. Consider what you want, besides orgasms, before you take a boy into your bed. I'm not judging, and if you want to celebrate your fifteenth birthday by fucking the entire Kenwood Academy basketball team, that's your prerogative. If, on the other hand, you want a relationship, you have to work at that. That's what your dad does, even for the girls who come to him for an 'expert deflowering' as your coupons offered. Think about the girls you know about and his relationship with them."

"They're all close friends or treat Dad as a mentor, or both. That's you, right?"

"I also love him," Natalie said. "He provides everything I need at this stage in life. What he can't provide is what I want in the future -- a husband and a family. But I'm not ready for either of those. And when I am, then your dad will be a mentor and intimate friend, but not intimate the way society thinks."

"Society has its head up its butt!"

"It does. I'm curious, if you could change just one thing, what would it be?"

That Dad had given ME an expert deflowering! But I couldn't say that to Natalie.

"That everyone would mind their own business!" I declared.

"You are your father's daughter! That would be his answer as well."

The board switched to 'LANDED' but that meant they still had to taxi and Kjell had to clear immigration and customs.

 Steve

My mobile phone rang just before 4:00pm, and thinking it was Nadia, I slipped it from my pocket. The displayed number wasn't one I recognized, and was in the city, not the suburbs.

"Steve Adams."

"Hi! It's Libby! You said we could get together during Christmas Break so an enthusiastic teenage girl could wildly fuck you!"

I chuckled, "I did say that."

"What are you doing right now?" Libby asked invitingly.

"Waiting on some friends from Ohio to arrive, which they should at any moment."

"Bummer. I'm busy tomorrow, but what about Sunday?"

"I'm free on Sunday," I replied. "What did you have in mind?"

Libby laughed softly, "I think you know!"

"I meant the time!"

"Oh," she replied flatly, causing me to laugh.

"Nice. You seem to have adopted the Adams/Block sarcastic style!"

"How could I not hanging around Jesse, Mom One, and Mom Two?!"

"Good point!" I chuckled.

"How about 11:00am on Sunday?" Libby suggested. "My parents will be gone all day, so we can use my room and keep it private from someone you call the Neighborhood Watch!"

"You're positive your parents won't come home?" I asked.

"They're in Colorado, and their flight gets in late on Sunday."

"Then I'll see you Sunday at your house at 11:00am."

"Prepare to have your mind blown!" Libby declared.

We said 'goodbye', I closed my phone and went to the Indian room to let my wives know.

"She's seventeen, right?" Kara asked.

"Yes. And Jesse knew she was going to ask. She also plans to start attending Philosophy Club in January. She said it was time to graduate, so to speak -- her first fuck with an actual adult, then attending Philosophy Club."

"She's a Junior, right?"

"Yes, though she plans to go to Harvard for pre-law."

"So when Liz is ready to retire, Libby will be your new *Consigliere*?" Kara asked.

"Nobody knows what the future will hold!"

The doorbell rang, and I left the Indian room and went to answer it. When I opened the door, I saw Audrey, a guy, and a young woman of college age.

"Hi!" Audrey exclaimed. "This is Brad, my boyfriend."

"Hi!" I replied, accepted a hug from her and shook hands with Brad. "Welcome!"

"And this is my friend, Isabella. She drove us here, and I hope you don't mind if she hangs out with us."

"«¡Mi casa es tu casa!» I replied. ("My house is your house!")

"«¿Hablas español?»" Isabella asked. ("You speak Spanish?")

"«Sí, pero no con fluidez.»" ("Yes, but not fluent.")

She smiled, I invited them in, and we went to the Indian room to introduce Brad and Isabella to my wives who already knew Audrey.

"How is Darla?" Kara asked Audrey.

"Still loving Germany and loving being a mom! Mark is six months old and a handful! I visited in August before school started. She just started practicing karate again."

"Let me take them downstairs and get them set in the guest room," I said.

I showed Audrey and Brad to the right-hand guest room, with Isabella tagging along.

"Cool house," she observed.

"You haven't seen anything yet!" Audrey declared. "Steve, can we give Brad and Isabella a complete tour?"

"Of course! Before I forget, I'll be busy all day tomorrow."

"No problem! Brad has never been to Chicago and Isabella is taking us sightseeing. Would it be OK if she came to the New Year's Eve party? She's twenty-one."

"She's welcome, of course. And she can bring a date, if she'd like."

"Thanks," Isabella said.

"Shall we take the tour?"

 Birgit

Kjell, Natalie and I finally arrived at the house just after 4:00pm, more than an hour later than we should have. I saw Dad coming down the stairs with Audrey, who was Darla's sister, and two people I didn't know.

"«Hejsan!»" Dad said to Kjell.

"«Hej, Steve!»" Kjell replied.

"Birgit, you know Audrey," Dad said. "This is her boyfriend Brad and her friend Isabella. Brad, Isabella, meet my daughter Birgit and her friend Kjell from Sweden."

They all greeted each other.

"We're going to put his bags in my room," I said. "What time is dinner?"

"6:00pm," Dad replied. "We ordered Chinese."

"OK."

I led Kjell up to my room and shut the door. We spoke Swedish together, as was normal for us.

"I emptied the top drawer in the dresser for you, and there's room in the closet for you to hang anything, and you can put your toothbrush and stuff in the bathroom."

"I should call home and let them know I arrived safely."

"OK. Use the landline phone on my desk. Dial 0-1-1 then 46, then 8, then your number."

He followed my instructions, spoke to his mom, and then replaced the handset.

"All good?" I asked.

"Yes. Mom said to say 'hi' to your dad. Let me unpack and we can go downstairs."

"What time did you want to go to bed?" I asked. "I know it's like 11:00pm by you."

"I think around 9:00pm," Kjell said. "That's about 3:00am by me, but that way I switch my clock quicker."

"Will you be too tired to fool around?" I asked.

"You're kidding, right?"

I giggled, "That's what I thought!"

 Steve

"Is everything Audrey told me about your relationships true?" Isabella asked as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I suspect so," I replied. "Would you like to meet my wives and girlfriends?"

"Weird, but yes!"

"It's only just begun to get weird!" Audrey exclaimed. "If you hang out here very long, you'll have your mind blown."

"We're having an impromptu Philosophy Club meeting on New Year's Eve afternoon," I said.

"Awesome!" Audrey exclaimed. "What time?"

"1:00pm," I replied. "We'll finish around 4:00pm so we can set up for the New Year's Eve party."

"What's 'Philosophy Club'?" Isabella asked.

"Audrey didn't tell you?" I asked.

"I only told her about your relationships so we could get past that surprise," Audrey replied. "Everything else she has to discover for herself."

"And Brad?"

"Same," Audrey smirked. "That's what my sister did to me, minus telling me about your relationships! Sauna after dinner?"

"You, Etheldred," I chuckled, "are a troublemaker!"

"What did I miss?" Brad asked.

"Our saunas are usually used naked," I replied. "Co-ed."

"In your dreams!" Isabella exclaimed.

"Birgit," I called out as she and Kjell came down the stairs. "Got a sec?"

She came over to us.

"Birgit, tell my friends how we use the sauna here."

"Naked, of course!" she declared.

"Why do I think I walked into an episode of the *Twilight Zone*?" Brad asked.

I chuckled, "Because you did! Come meet my wives and girlfriends, and we'll take it from there."

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"What are you guys doing while you're here?" Aunt Jennie asked after we sat down for dinner at her house on Friday evening.

"We're going to the Art Museum with Pavel, Larisa, Rachel, Abi, and Viktoria. They're also bringing a girl named April and her boyfriend Mark, and another girl named Jordan."

"Are they from the same church as everyone else?" Aunt Jennie asked.

"Yes, though Abi doesn't go to church. She's Rachel's best friend because her mom and grandma are close friends with Rachel's dad."

"That's the doctor, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Chelsea replied. "And I don't think they mentioned it last time, but Viktoria is Rachel's cousin, though, by her biological mom, not her current mom. And Hope is Rachel's cousin because her mom was adopted by Rachel's dad's parents."

"I need a scorecard!" Kent declared.

"You seem to handle my family without a scorecard!" I said.

Kent laughed, "I've had time! Your dad walked Jennie down the aisle when he was a teenager!"

"That was when he met Mom, right?" I asked.

"Yes. He brought Jesse's mom as his date, and that's when I had the first clue about your family, thought I didn't realize it at the time!"

"Blame the Reds," Aunt Jennie said. "They were on TV and I mentioned to your mom that your dad was watching the game. She went to see him, and the rest is, as they say, history!"

"When are you heading home?" Kent asked.

"On Tuesday morning," Chelsea replied. "We're going to a New Year's party at a friend's house in Oswego."

When we finished dinner, Chelsea and I offered to clean up, then spent the evening with her parents.



December 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Saturday morning, I left the house early, and headed to the Gold Coast, arriving at the building where Ken Thompson had his condo just before 7:00am. I pulled up in front of the building, and a liveried doorman came to the car. I lowered the passenger window, and he bent down.

"Are you here for Miss Thompson?" he asked.

"Yes."

He stood, waved, and Emma came out of the building. He opened the door for her, she got in, buckled in, and he shut the door.

"Have a nice day, Miss Thompson!"

"Thanks, Bob!" she replied.

She closed the window, and I pulled away from the curb.

"Sorry about not greeting you with a kiss, but I don't want to be public given I'm sixteen and you're thirty-nine."

"A wise choice. Breakfast?"

"Yes."

"We'll head for Bucktown Bistro for breakfast, and then, if you're still interested in making the beast with two backs, to the apartment I mentioned."

"You think I might have changed my mind? And that I wouldn't have called to tell you?"

"Do you remember what I said about that particular commitment?"

"That it was never irrevocable. But most guys would be pissed."

"I suspect you know my response."

"That you're not like most guys!"

"Correct. And you agree, otherwise you wouldn't have sat down next to me in San Francisco, continued the conversation, asked to sit next to me, and invited me to make the beast with two backs!"

"Perhaps that's my typical behavior."

"Perhaps it is," I replied. "That doesn't change my observation that you don't think I'm like most guys. You specifically said boys your age were complete idiots; you also said your mom wouldn't understand you having an older, *steady* boyfriend, implying you might have gone out with an older guy."

"And if I have?"

"It's only relevant if you believe it's relevant, and, to be clear, not any of my business one way or the other."

"You're not interested in knowing my history?"

"Of course I'm interested, but what you choose to share is up to you. Ultimately, it's a question of what you want out of our relationship."

"It takes two to Tango," Emma countered. "Don't we have to have what's called a 'meeting of the minds'?"

I chuckled, "Spoken like a lawyer's kid!"

"I *am* a lawyer's kid! A meeting of the minds, mutual consideration, an offer, and acceptance!"

"Those are the elements of a contract!"

"I'm curious why you think it's one-sided."

"I don't, actually. I know what I want from the relationship, but I don't know what you want, beyond your statement that you want to make the beast with two backs multiple times before you fly home next week."

"What DO you want besides sleeping with an underage girl?"

"You keep using that word..." I said lightly.

"And it *does* mean what I think it means! I'd like to hear your answer."

"I am always on the lookout for people who are open-minded, counter-cultural, and who think the country is on the wrong track. I bond with them, build a relationship, and mentor them. That's the most important part, and we can actually do that without sleeping together."

"And you'd be OK with that?"

"Yes."

"But you're expecting to have sex with me."

"Anticipating, but not expecting, It's a subtle difference, but an important one."

"Because I could change my mind."

"Yes. And that would not upset me in any way, shape, or form."

"Would you be disappointed?"

"Yes, but not in a way that held it against you. What I'm looking for is another member of my subversive cadre. The structure of the relationship depends on

you, your needs, and what you want to achieve, both short and long term. That could be anything from a close, ongoing relationship to a 'catch and release' situation."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means some of the subversives I recruit choose a path that doesn't involve regular interaction; others choose to be my personal karate students; others I see occasionally because they live some distance away. The question is, what do you want? I mean, besides the obvious."

"I actually thought about some things you said, and I'm considering attending college in Chicago to study computers. I mentioned it to my dad, and he thinks computers would be a good choice, and he wouldn't object to me being around more. At least I'd get to see him regularly, unlike my mom, who is pretty much always working."

"Did you mention you met me?" I asked.

"Yes, and he said your company is very forward thinking and has an excellent reputation."

"We are a pure meritocracy and take very good care of our staff. Does your dad know you're seeing me today?"

"No. I told him I was going to have breakfast with a friend and hang out with them. He doesn't pry, so there won't be any problems."

"OK. I should probably ask what you like to eat so we can plan lunch and dinner."

"Anything is OK. Chinese, pizza, or whatever are all good. You have dietary restrictions, right?"

"Yes. Chinese for dinner, then. For lunch, Potbelly's is close and they have soup and salads, in addition to sandwiches."

"That's cool. What's your favorite thing to eat?"

I smirked, "A leading question if there ever was one!"

Emma laughed, "Pussy?"

"Tastes great and less filling!"

"Isn't filling it the point?"

"Eventually, but I did promise to do that until you could no longer stand it."

We arrived at Bucktown Bistro and were seated by the morning hostess, and Pam came over to our table.

"I didn't expect to see you until after New Year's," she said. "Earl Grey?"

"Yes, please."

"And you, Miss?"

"OJ, please."

Pam left to get our drinks.

"You must come here often," Emma observed.

"A men's group meets on alternate Saturdays. We've been meeting longer than you've been alive, though we started at Lou Mitchell's on Jackson."

"You've made that point several times."

"Just as you've made the 'underage' point several times."

"When did you actually first meet?"

"May 1986," I replied. "So about five months before you were born, if your birthday was in October, which you implied with the timing of your OB/GYN exam."

"October 22nd. When's yours?"

"April 22nd, so exactly six months offset, though 1963 instead of 1986."

Pam brought our drinks and asked Emma if she was ready to order, which she was. Once Pam had taken Emma's order, she left the table.

"You're not going to have anything other than tea?" Emma asked.

"Pam will bring my breakfast," I replied. "I've eaten the same thing every time I've been here since we first came here in July 1987. Pam knows my order, and those of the regulars in our group of around thirty guys. Only new people or irregular attendees actually have to order. Actually, I do need to correct myself -- I swapped the potatoes for fruit when the docs determined my susceptibility to syncopal events when I ate complex carbohydrates."

"You never change?"

"No. I do come here for dinner, and then I have a varied menu, usually something Alex Saunders whips up for my party."

"I guess after sixteen years, you'd know the chef!"

"Yes."

"OK to change topics?"

"Sure."

"When do you teach karate?"

"I have a regular class for my personal students on Saturday afternoon and sometimes teach the daily classes at the dojo. We don't hold classes during the week between Christmas and New Year's."

"You have other instructors under you?"

"I don't run the dojo," I replied. "I'm the most senior instructor, though."

"But you have your own students?"

"Yes. I have my own specialized teaching system that is more challenging than simple physical fitness. It's also spiritual and intellectual."

"Separate from the philosophy discussions you mentioned?"

"Yes. If you're interested in a sample, we're having an impromptu meeting on Tuesday. And if you aren't doing anything for New Year's, you're welcome to come to our New Year's Eve party. You'd have a chance to meet my wives and kids."

"Do your kids know about your lifestyle?"

"I have three wives and two girlfriends who live in the house, plus I have kids with four women. What do YOU think?"

Emma laughed, "Good point!"  Birgit

"Are you OK hanging out with Albert, Nicholas, Peter, and Julie today?" I asked Kjell as we snuggled in bed when we woke up on Saturday morning.

"Sure. What are we going to do?"

"Lunch at Giordano's, the Museum of Science and Industry, Chinese for dinner, then see *Catch Me if You Can*, a thriller about the FBI chasing a guy who pretended to be a Pan Am pilot, a doctor, and conned people out of millions. It's based on a true story."

"That sounds good. Jesse and Scarlett aren't coming?"

"No. He's having a party for his hockey team and the girls' softball team. Matthew is in Ohio with Chelsea, and my sisters are having their own thing at Amber's house next door, but it's girls only. And Michael is hanging out with his friend Andi, her dad, and Eduardo. Tomorrow we're hanging out with Jesse and Scarlett and some of his friends."

"Cool."

"Do you want breakfast?"

"I'm famished! Someone wore me out last night, and I was already tired!"

I giggled, "I promise to wear you out every night!"

"I won't object!"

We got out of bed, showered, dressed, and went downstairs to have breakfast.

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"Can someone explain the complicated relationships?" I asked as we walked from the parking garage to the art museum.

"Jordan's mom is my dad's sister," Rachel said. "Viktoria's dad and my biological mom were brother and sister. My mom died the day I was born, and my dad remarried. April's mom was adopted by my paternal grandparents when she was fourteen. Abi has been my best friend since I was born, and her mom and grandma are close friends of my dad, and her grandma taught my dad to play guitar. Larisa's mom is a girl my dad has known his whole life and her dad was a deacon; they actually dated for a short time. Pavel's dad is the priest of his church. Mark goes to the same church as April and Larisa."

"Your mom really died the day you were born?" I asked.

"Yes. She had a congenital defect of blood vessels in her brain, and according to the doctors, there was no way to detect it or fix it if they could detect it. Well, now we could detect it with an MRI, but still not fix it."

"So your siblings are from your stepmom?"

"Just my mom. I never knew my biological mom, so I never thought of my mom as anything other than my mom. They told me about it when I was five, though I

didn't really understand until I was older. But it's more complicated because I have a half-brother who's the son of a doctor friend of my dad's."

"Why does this sound like my family?" I asked with a goofy smile.

Rachel laughed, "I've heard! But it's not quite like that. My brother Alexi's mom is lesbian, though they conceived artificially. And he doesn't call his mom's partner 'mom', he calls her 'Aunt Tessa'."

"Your family is almost as complicated as mine," I replied.

"And it gets MORE complicated," Rachel declared, "because my paternal grandpa remarried a much younger woman, and I have an uncle who is only six months older than I am!"

"My mom had just turned fifteen when I was born," April interjected. "I never met my dad because he got twenty-five years for having sex with my mom when she was fourteen and he was forty."

"Did you want to meet him?" Chelsea asked.

"Not really, and even if I did, he's not allowed to have visitors under eighteen."

"Did your mom get married?"

"Yes, right after she graduated from college. I like my stepdad a lot."

"I don't know if anyone told you, but my mom lives with her boyfriend," I said.

"How long have they been together?" Rachel asked.

"They actually dated in college, but then he went back to Spain. When he moved to the US, they got together again."

"My mom's husband isn't my dad," Larisa said. "My biological dad is a complete fanatic."

"I don't think anyone except Pavel and Jordan has a traditional family," Chelsea said. "Mark's parents are divorced and remarried."

"You do," I said. "I mean, sure, your mom was married to the soldier who died in Vietnam, but your mom and dad were married when you were born and are still married."

"True."

"And honestly," I said, "what truly matters is we all have parents who care for us."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

"You know," I said as we walked through the door of the NIKA apartment, "you never did tell me your superpower."

"You're right, I didn't!" Emma replied. "And I said I didn't reveal it to just anyone!"

"I'm not 'just anyone!'"

"You never told me yours, either!" Emma countered. "But I suspect you're about to show me."

I smiled, took her hand, and led her to the second bedroom, which was right across from the bathroom.

"I suppose it's time for a proper kiss," Emma said with a smile.

I held out my arms, and she melted into them, her firm body pressed against mine. Our lips touched, then parted, and our tongues began a gentle dance. Remembering what Emma had said, I moved my hands to cup her butt and gave it a squeeze, and Emma broke the kiss.

"Told ya' you could find it!" she declared.

"Any requests?"

"Make me feel really, really good!"

"I can do that! I hate to be crass, but STI test?"

Emma smiled, "Fortunately my gynecologist's office was open yesterday and could fax it to me."

She handed it to me and I handed it back, then, as was my practice, I showed her my card.

"What would have happened if I couldn't get it?" she asked.

"I trust you, but I'd have had to say 'no'. I'm glad it worked out!"

"Me, too! Now, make me feel good!"

Three minutes later we were both naked, and I took in her gorgeous, lithe body -- small, firm breasts capped with light brown nipples, a flat stomach, graceful legs,

a smoothly shaved mons, and plump labia, already slick with her juices. I pulled down the comforter, then took Emma's hand and led her to the bed. She got in, turned on her side, and I go in next to her, lying on my side facing her.

We French kissed for a bit, then I gently pushed Emma onto her back and lowered my mouth to her breast. I spent about five minutes on her breasts before I kissed my way down to her bare mons, breathing deeply and taking in her wonderful scent. I planted several kisses on the inside of Emma's thighs, then several more along her plump labia. After those kisses, I pressed my tongue into her, coating it with her spicy juices.

Emma moaned softly as I swirled my tongue and breathed in sharply when I ran it over her clit. I closed my mouth and sucked hard, causing Emma to groan, and she began slowly rolling her hips as I pleased her to her first orgasm. Knowing we had all day, and I could keep my promise of hours of oral sex later, I moved up, grasped my shaft, rubbed my glans along Emma's slick labia, then slowly entered her. She was so wet that I had no problem sliding in until my pubic hair was pressed against her mons.

I bent down, we exchanged a French kiss, and I began fucking her with slow gentle thrusts. Emma wrapped her arms and legs around me and we began moving in sync. About every five strokes I ground against her for several seconds before resuming our movements. About four minutes after we started, Emma shuddered and moaned into my mouth as her pussy spasmed around my dick as she had her first of four orgasms.

Her fourth one was the strongest and brought me to the point of no return. I pushed deep into her tight, spasming tunnel, groaned and fired jet after jet of cum into her. When my orgasm had run its course, I withdrew, slid down, and used my tongue to bring her to her sixth orgasm of the day. My goal achieved, I moved up and Emma and I exchanged a fierce French kiss.

"My turn," she said, breathing hard.

She gently nudged me to my back and then, following the pattern I'd used earlier, sucked on both my nipples, then kissed her way down to my groin. She grasped my semi-flaccid shaft, licked it clean, then took my glans into her mouth, sucking and swirling her tongue. It didn't take long before I was erect, at which point Emma released me, threw her leg over me to straddle me and impaled herself on my rock-hard dick.

She leaned down, and we kissed as she moved gently back and forth, rubbing her clit against me while squeezing and releasing her muscles, providing intense pleasure. A few minutes later, she shuddered as she had the first of another four orgasms, following which she began moving up and down, bringing me off, pushing herself hard against me as I pumped cum into her.

Emma stayed on top of me and we exchanged kisses until I softened and slipped from her. She gave me one more kiss, then turned, straddling my face and planting her labia on my lips. She lowered her head and once again began pleasuring me with her mouth. This time, though, she took it to completion, and after having three good orgasms from my tongue, I had my release, cum spurting into Emma's soft mouth.

After the last spurt, she turned, we exchanged a deep French kiss, and then she moved from on top of me and snuggled close, one leg and one arm draped over me. We lay quietly for about fifteen minutes, and I savored the experience I'd just had, and looked forward to another fourteen hours with Emma.

"Did you come up with a nickname?" she asked.

"You didn't like any of the ones I suggested," I replied. "Why don't you pick one?"

"Well, she said," an hour ago 'Virgo' would have worked, but not now!"

An interesting revelation, and one that both did and didn't surprise me. Virginity did not imply ignorance, and Bethany's book described things in sufficient detail that even an inexperienced girl would know what to do. Given Emma's obvious intelligence, and her «joie de vivre» everything lined up, and I had no doubt the implication was true, and I shouldn't have been even slightly surprised.

"No comment?" Emma asked about ten seconds later, as I'd failed to respond due to contemplating the situation.

"Sorry," I replied. "I didn't expect that particular revelation."

"Does it make a difference?"

"As a young woman once explained, virginity is simply a state of being, not a thing in and of itself. There are many things we do for the first time, and they are not special because they are the first time, or the tenth time, or the hundredth time, but because they are special things to do. Sex is always special, whether the first time or after a lifetime.

"Another way to look at it is that it's a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Having sex for the first time is a ceremony recognizing that transition, a symbol if you will, not the transition. In your case, the transition occurred in the terminal at the airport in San Francisco, and we just confirmed it with a ritual."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Emma replied. "To me, it was simply time, but I can see how what you're saying actually fits."

"Out of curiosity, what caused the change in thinking?"

"I've made out a lot, and I've felt turned on, but never enough to want to go further than kissing. I thought about it, obviously, because the guys wanted more, but I just didn't feel it. With you, the second I sat down next to you and a voice screamed in my brain 'This is THE guy!' and 'You *have* to fuck him!'. I can't explain it, really."

That was Kara's experience when she sat down next to me in Mrs. Brewer's chemistry class just over twenty-two years in the past.

"And was it what you expected? Please be honest; you can't possibly hurt my feelings."

"Weirdly, I believe you."

"Why is it weird?"

"The impression I have from my friends is that guys are really touchy about that subject."

"I'm not."

"You have nothing to worry about! It was everything I'd hoped it would be. And from your reaction, I was knowledgeable enough that you couldn't tell."

"The biggest 'tell' is nervousness or tentativeness. You showed neither. There are no physiological signs for most girls over age fifteen, especially if they're physically active. And there is more than enough information available in books and online that anyone can now the correct techniques for oral sex. Screwing is pretty simple, when you think about it.

"In/Out/Repeat?" Emma teased.

"Pretty much! Sure, there are positions and variations and techniques, but it's simple enough for an inexperienced girl to not give it away if she doesn't want to, so long as she's not nervous or tentative. The old wives' tales about blood and painful intercourse are just that, at least for the most part.

"Younger teens who don't play sports might have an intact hymen, but it's typically very thin and if there's pain, it's more like an injection, and goes away quickly. Painful intercourse is nearly always due to lack of lubrication, which is why foreplay is important. And yes, it's entire possible to be *virgo intacta* at an older age, but that's rare."

"You seem very well informed for a guy."

"I'm going to give good odds you've read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*."

"My mom gave me a copy when I turned twelve, right before I had my first period."

"Doctor Bethany Krajick and I met in Junior High and we're still friends. Her son and my daughter are very close, well, they will be again once he gets past the whole 'cooties' thing."

Emma laughed, "How old?"

"He's thirteen; she's twelve. They were basically a couple from the time they were little, but puberty is an awkward time. They'll figure it out and get back together."

"And you're OK with that, of course."

"Of course. My kids are independent individuals who have to make their own decisions."

"And if your underage daughter were doing what we're doing?"

"My underage daughter is allowed to have her boyfriends spend the night at the house. You do seem to like using that word!"

Emma laughed softly, "Because I figured you got off on the idea of being with an underage girl. And thinking about it, I should have told you I was a virgin to give you an even bigger thrill!"

"Actually, no, you shouldn't have. I'd have behaved differently."

"Why?"

"I have a habit of overthinking things and talking girls to death to make sure they're really ready to do what they've implied or said they want to do. And that would have been true of you, even though it was obvious to me what you wanted and that you were mature enough to make that decision."

"But the thrill?"

"Works after the fact, too," I chuckled. "What would you like to do next?"

"I believe you promised to use your mouth on my until I couldn't stand it!"

"I did!" I agreed.

IV. I Want to Go Home

December 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"I'm not really comfortable with the idea of being naked in front of a bunch of High School boys," Scarlett said while we were setting up for the party.

"Nobody is forcing you," I replied. "You don't have to join us in the sauna."

"But I feel like if I don't, it's over between us," she replied.

"I'm not sure why you would think that."

"Because you want to do that for the rest of your life, and include your kids, too."

"While that's true, compromise is possible. My dad has variable rules for the sauna, and everyone decides what works for them."

"But you'd be unhappy," Scarlett protested. "And I don't think that's something I could ever do, and I'm not sure I'd want my kids to do it."

"I'm not sure what you want me to say," I replied. "But don't do something you're uncomfortable doing simply because you think I want you to."

"You *do* want me to," Scarlett protested.

"In the sense that I invited you, yes. It's the same with everyone on the hockey team and the softball team who decided to attend."

"But they all agreed."

"All the ones who were at least Sophomores who chose to attend, yes."

"And you're OK with other guys staring at me and getting erections?"

"First of all, nobody is going to stare. We've discussed proper sauna etiquette. As for having an erection, it's normal until you get used to it. I didn't have that problem because I've been in the sauna since I was a baby, but teens and adults eventually don't have the reaction because they learn that nudity does not imply sex. Americans are simply too prudish about our bodies and WAY too hung up about sex."

"And if your *dad* saw me?"

"My dad has seen hundreds, and I mean *hundreds* of naked girls, of all ages, in the sauna, including his sister. He wouldn't stare and wouldn't even really notice."

"Oh, give me a break! Seriously?"

"Seriously. I've seen scores of girls naked in the sauna, including my moms and my sisters. It has ZERO to do with sex. ZERO."

"I think you're wrong."

I shrugged, "If that's the case, then you're probably right about us. What do you want to do?"

"I want to go home."

I suppressed a sigh and said, "I'd prefer you stayed and just skipped the sauna."

"I'm not sleeping with you, if that's what you think is going to happen."

"That's up to you, too. The sofa in our living room is a sleeper sofa, and you're welcome to use it."

"I'm going to call and change my flight."

"If that's what you want to do, and you can, I'll ask my moms to take you to the airport, because I'm hosting the party."

"It is."

"Suit yourself," I replied.

 Steve

"How about a shower and then we go for lunch?" I asked Emma after I'd licked her to a dozen orgasms, and we'd had a slow, sensual screw.

She agreed, and I led her across the hall to the bathroom. I adjusted the shower controls, and once the water was warm, we stepped in and began to wash each other.

"Remember your question about what I want?"

"Yes."

"What would you say if I decided to move to Chicago, become your karate student, get a degree in computer science, and eventually work for your company?"

Liz would object, but I already had made an exception for Cecily Younger, so the key would be to ensure things with Emma ended before it was time to apply for a job. I suspected they would, as she didn't strike me as someone who would, in effect, put her life on hold for a long-term relationship with me.

"I'd say we'd need to discuss it, but it's not out of the realm of possibilities. May I make one suggestion?"

"What's that?"

"Think about it for a few days, when you've had some time to think about it."

"Could I see you again before I go home? Maybe next weekend? Well, in addition to New Year's Eve?"

"We can probably arrange that," I replied. "It would have to be next Saturday, given my commitments between now and then. That would give you a week to think about what you just suggested, and we can discuss it."

"You think the afterglow of sex is interfering with my thought process?"

"It sure does mine," I chuckled.

"I certainly wasn't thinking straight after a dozen orgasms from your tongue, that's for sure! What do you like best?"

"What we just did -- slow, gentle, missionary-position lovemaking."

"I have to assume you've done basically everything a guy could do with a girl?"

"Including multiple girls at once," I chuckled.

"I am SO not surprised!" Emma exclaimed. "Mind if I ask how old you were the first time?"

"Fourteen. She was twenty-three."

"How the heck did a fourteen-year-old kid get a twenty-three-year-old woman into bed?!"

"She asked me," I replied. "She thought I was around eighteen because I looked older as a teen."

We finished washing, rinsed off, and got out of the shower. We dried ourselves, dressed, and then left the apartment for the walk to Potbelly's for lunch.

"Hi, Steve!" Katelyn Shanahan exclaimed when we approached the counter.

"Hi, Katelyn! How is Senior year going?"

"You know, it's Senior year! I can't wait to graduate!"

"How are things with Tim?"

"Great! Who's your friend?"

"This is Emma," I said. "She's visiting from California. Emma, my friend Katelyn Shanahan."

They greeted each other and then we placed our orders.

"Did you hear anything more from my dad?" Katelyn asked as she swiped my credit card.

"No."

"He busted those three cops who tried to shake you down," she said. "They're all suspended as of last Monday."

"Not surprising," I replied. "I take it they found a complainant who had actually succumbed to their scam?"

"I don't know the details, but I think so, yes."

I signed the credit card receipt and Emma and I moved away from the register, and Katelyn helped the next customer.

"You have to explain," Emma said quietly.

"Once we have our food."

My salad and Katelyn's soup/sandwich combo were made, and we took them to a seat near the front window.

"Her dad works in Internal Affairs," I said. "In late September last year, a female cop and her two male partners tried to entrap me into solicitation charges with a supposedly underage girl, but I caught on."

"They had your number," Emma smirked. "But you don't have to pay for it!"

"They actually had no idea. They were targeting professional men in their thirties and forties at Union Station and shaking them down after making an arrest."

"How did you know?"

"I work with teens and young adults at the dojo, and I'm also very good at reading people. The female cop was pretending to be a teenager. She was twenty-six, but looked sixteen or seventeen the way she was dressed and made up. It was her eyes that gave her away. They clearly had run the scam successfully in the past, and at some point, Internal Affairs became aware and investigated. Katelyn's dad called me to ask questions, but given I'd avoided their setup, I didn't have much to offer, as it could have been a legit sting."

"Was that call before or after you slept with his daughter?" Emma asked with a smirk.

"After," I chuckled. "I met her here. It was a complete coincidence that her dad was the IAD investigator."

"I'm going to guess that Tim is her boyfriend?"

"Yes. He asked her to a school dance, and she decided to end our relationship."

"Who approached whom?" Emma asked.

"I ordered, she asked for my card, I gave it to her, she called me, and you've already deduced what happened after that."

"You said the girls approached you, and I took that with a grain of salt, but now I'm reconsidering."

"You should, given with very few exceptions, every girl I've been with since age fourteen has been the one to initiate the relationship. The most important exception is Kara, who I chased in High School."

"And caught, obviously, given you're married to her!"

"Obviously! There was one other, but that was one of the low points in my history. Basically, I set out to corrupt a girl my girlfriend didn't like."

"Wait!" Emma protested.

"I know," I replied. "My entire existence is a complex set of seeming contradictions. I chalk it all up to Loki."

"The Norse god?"

"Yes. I think he's a better personification of Fate than anyone or anything else. Change and chaos are the only consistent things in my life. But I wouldn't trade my life for anything."

"Did you catch that girl?"

"Unfortunately. It created years of turmoil and emotional pain for everyone involved. It took nearly nine years for both of us to make peace with what happened between us."

"That sounds more than just a bad reaction to losing her virginity."

"It was way more complicated. There's a lot about me you don't know, which you'll discover over time if you're here and attend Philosophy Club, which I think you should. Also, let me know when you're ready to apply to college. I know several professors at IIT. I take it you'll start Fall semester 2004 and move here the summer before?"

"You missed the implication of what I said," Emma replied. "I meant move here as soon as possible, so probably June. I can finish High School here."

"I did miss that. I assumed you meant after graduation. Is that going to cause trouble with your parents?"

"Mom will be pissed, but I don't care, given she's married to her job. Dad will be OK with it, and his condo has two bedrooms. It might cramp his style, but he won't object."

"And your relationship with me?"

"If you're good friends with Mrs. Spencer and Ms. Spurgeon, I can't imagine he'd object to me joining your dojo or even coming to your Philosophy Club. I'm obviously not going to tell him about the other stuff!"

"Then I'm positive you should think it through, and we'll discuss it next Saturday."

 Jesse

"Would you be able to take Scarlett to the airport at 4:00pm?" I asked Mom One.

"Why? What happened?"

"We had a disagreement about the sauna," I replied. "She feels compelled, even though I made it clear she could simply skip it. She's uncomfortable with the idea of co-ed saunas, even if it's only family."

"And that caused her to want to go home?" Mom Two asked.

"She said we're through, and despite offering her the sleeper sofa, she insisted on calling to change her flight. I tried to talk to her about Dad's philosophy and about nudity, but she strongly disagrees. In her mind, if she doesn't do it, we're done, and she's not going to do it."

"You know we support you, but are you sure you're making a wise decision?"

"Luna and I spoke to each person who's coming to the party and explained exactly what we intended. Luna and I both discussed the 'nudity is not about sex' philosophy with them. WE could call it off, but I think it's important to get the point across. People need to stop being so prudish."

"You sound like your dad," Mom One said. "And that's a compliment. So long as you're sure."

"I am. I don't think there's any risk of anyone saying anything because everyone has known for over a month and it hasn't leaked. And they all know that no fooling around or teasing is allowed, so we can honestly answer any questions from any parents if they ever arise."

"Are you going to try to stay in touch with Scarlett?" Mom Two asked.

"I'll call her in a few weeks, but I suspect that won't change anything."

"I think one of us should stay as the nominal chaperone with Yuriko," Mom One said. "I'll take Scarlett and Mom Two will stay."

"Thanks," I replied.

 Birgit

"Aren't you going to the hockey team party?" Peter asked Nicholas as we walked to the museum after lunch.

"They didn't invite Freshmen," Nicholas replied. "Jesse talked to me and they wanted everyone to be at least fifteen, and you know I'm only thirteen, even though I'm a Freshman."

"Did you skip a grade or start early?" Julie asked.

"I started early," Nicholas replied. "And it's OK, because I'm not sure I could handle being naked in the sauna with fifteen girls! I might have a very embarrassing problem!"

Everyone laughed, and I thought that was a problem I'd help with if he were fourteen!

"Leave it to Jesse," Peter said, shaking his head.

"As if you'd pass it up!" Julie teased.

"I didn't say THAT," Peter replied. "Just that only Jesse could get the entire girls' softball team naked in the sauna!"

"For the third time," I giggled. "The first two times, he was the only guy."

"«Herregud!»" Kjell exclaimed, shaking his head. ("Holy crap!")

"«Svartsjuk?»" I asked. ("Jealous?")

"«Självklart!»" Kjell chuckled. ("Obviously!")

"There they go speaking in secret code again!" Peter exclaimed.

"Oh, please!" I protested. "Your dad taught you to speak Greek! And you went to Greek School at your church on Sunday afternoons!"

"You don't hear me speaking it except occasionally with Dad! Mostly it's the old men at church, and of course, some of the prayers."

"You go to church?" Kjell asked.

"Yes. We're Greek Orthodox. Birgit's dad's Swedish doctor friend is a member of our church, along with her husband."

"Who's that?" Kjell asked.

"Sofia Katsaros," I replied. "You'll meet her, her husband, and their daughter Alexa, on New Year's Eve. She's my pediatrician. And, when I asked to go on the Pill, and told her who I was planning to be with, she called me a scamp! She also said the boy should be VERY afraid!"

Everyone laughed.

"TMI, Sis!" Albert declared, even though he'd laughed.

"Right," I giggled, "because Kjell is sleeping in the guest room! And your Yorkie will be here on Tuesday!"

"A gentleman who is planning to be an officer does not kiss and tell!" Albert said firmly.

"It wasn't kissing I was referring to!" I declared.

We reached the museum and after showing our family passes, we went in.

 Steve

"What next?" Emma asked when we returned to the NIKA apartment after lunch.

"That's up to you," I replied. "At some point, we should take a bubble bath."

"How about after dinner? Or maybe it's the last thing?"

"That works! I really like everything we've done and we can just keep doing that, but would you be willing to give me a good, hard fucking?"

"Your wish is my command!" I declared.

As she'd requested, we engaged in what I'd once promised Tabitha -- a raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fuck, and I surprised Emma by pulling out and cumming in her mouth, instructing her not to swallow before we exchanged a deep French kiss.

"I didn't expect that!" she gasped, breathing heavily after the kiss.

"Which part?" I asked.

"Cumming in my mouth *and* telling me not to swallow first!"

"And?"

"Wild and crazy! I was actually was excited by the way we finished, and you clearly were!"

"As I said, my preferences lie at the other end of the spectrum, but my goal is always to please my partner."

"OK, to ask what the craziest thing you've done is?"

"It's OK to ask," I replied.

Emma laughed and rolled her eyes.

"What's the craziest thing you've done?"

"I think it has to be the threesome where two seventeen-year-old girls started as virgins, I took them around the world and they both pegged me. Seventeen is legal in Illinois, by the way."

"Around the world...as in anal?"

"Yes."

"And I'm going to surmise 'pegged' means the same thing, but I'm curious how that would work."

"A harness and a dildo," I replied. "And lots of lube!"

"And that was pleasurable?" Emma asked.

"Yes, but not physically."

"You've lost me."

"Remember what I said about pleasing my partner? That made both girls happy, so it made me happy. Oh, and I left out one thing -- it was arranged by Kara and she watched."

"NO WAY!" Emma gasped.

"Completely true," I replied. "Kara has both voyeuristic and exhibitionist desires. If we'd followed the typical pattern, you'd have asked her about being with me and she'd have suggested watching, especially if you were a virgin."

"Can this get *any* stranger?"

"Do NOT ask that question," I chuckled. "Asking it guarantees that Loki will ensure it does!"

"Girls ask your wife if they can sleep with you?"

"Yes."

"And she agrees."

"Yes."

"And asks if she can watch."

"Yes."

"*Twilight Zone* time!"

"You aren't the first person to suggest that! I typically use the Lewis Carroll reference of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*."

"The Heinlein parallels are interesting," Emma observed.

"As I said in San Francisco, it's usually the first book I recommend to my students or anyone I'm mentoring."

"That makes sense. The other thing that makes sense at this point is for me to complete the around-the-world tour."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"This is a great group," I said to Chelsea as we stood together in the Art Museum.

"I think so, too. I'm really glad I met Pavel and Larisa. I actually like hanging out with them more than the girls from High School."

"Everyone is so mature, including Jordan. It reminds me of my family."

"All of their parents are more like your mom and Eduardo than they are the typical Ohio parents. They're all treated as adults and given quite a bit of freedom, though probably not as much as your dad gives Birgit."

"I think you have that backwards," I chuckled. "Dad tries to rein her in, but *nobody* can control Birgit!"

Chelsea laughed, "There might be some truth to that! Abi is a free spirit, very much like that, but with a bit more self-control."

"That's a low bar," I replied with a grin. "A *very* low bar."

"I was thinking of inviting some of them to visit next summer. Would that be OK?"

"Absolutely. We just need to check with Eduardo about the townhouse, or my dad about guest rooms. Who were you thinking?"

"Abi, Rachel, Pavel, and Larisa."

"Sounds good."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

Luna arrived as planned about thirty minutes before the party so she could help finish setting up. I greeted her with a hug and invited her in.

"Where's Scarlett?" she asked.

"She decided to go home," I replied.

"Trouble in paradise?"

"She's upset about the sauna plans. What's annoying is she's known about it for over a month, and I had made it clear it was OK if she didn't participate. I thought everything was cool until she objected this morning and created an impasse."

"What's her problem with it?"

"That she'd have to be naked in front of a bunch of High School guys, but it was more than that, really. You know how our family is with the sauna."

"I was a bit weirded out by that at first because of your moms and your sisters, but I totally get your perspective now, even if I'm not sure I could do that with my kids."

"And that's OK," I replied. "The key is being on the same page. Dad always had variable rules for the sauna, depending on who was around and the day of the week. The key is that his wives and girlfriends are all on the same page with him. And you know my little sisters wear bathing suits."

"Ashley and Stephe, but not Birgit! She'd walk naked down Woodlawn Avenue if she wouldn't be arrested for doing it!"

"That is my sister," I agreed.

"Are you doing anything tomorrow?"

"Just going to church, why?"

"I'll tag along if we can spend some time together afterwards."

"Your parents won't be upset if you go to my church rather than yours?"

"Our priest says going to an Orthodox church fulfills our Sunday obligation."

"You catha-holics are weird!" I teased.

"Oh, please! If there's any mainstream church weirder than the Orthodox Church, I want to know what it is!"

"Well, we don't use actual live snakes in worship, so I think there's weirder!"

"That's why I said 'mainstream'. Pick me up at 7:00am?"

"I could, but you'd need to come to lunch with Jerry, Mia, Mikey, Nicole, Birgit, and Kjell. We're hanging out in the afternoon, too."

"That kind of ruins my plan," Luna grouched. "But you know what? I'll come along if it's OK."

"It is. If you aren't doing anything on Monday, you could come over."

"I'll be at your house at 8:00am!" Luna declared happily.

We made sure the coolers were full of soda and put out snacks. I turned on the sauna and put out towels for everyone to sit on. We had just finished when the Lee, Freddy, and Mitch arrived, followed quickly by Keisha, Jazlyn, and Tyra. Fifteen minutes later, everyone had arrived, and we all went to the basement.

"Team," Luna smirked, "Strip!"

The girls all laughed and began taking off their clothes, as did I.

"What are you waiting for, boys?" Shelly teased.

Hilariously, at least in my mind, the guys were shier than the girls, but most of the girls had participated in at least one of the saunas, and most in both. I totally wasn't surprised that several of the guys held their hands over their groin to cover obvious boners, and we all went into the sauna and sat down, guys on one side and girls on the other, as Luna and I had agreed, with her sitting just to my left.

"OK, this is weird," Owen said, pulling a towel from the pile and putting it on his lap.

"You get used to it," I said. "Just remember the guidelines."

"What guidelines?" Shelly asked.

"It's OK to notice, it's not OK to stare," I replied. "And no innuendos or teasing. Didn't Luna mention that?"

"Just the no innuendos part," Shelly replied. "I guess girls are less likely to stare."

"Speak for yourself!" Jazlyn exclaimed, causing all the girls and some guys to laugh.

"Jesse, who's chaperoning?" Shelly asked. "In case my parents ask when I get home."

"Mom Two and Yuriko," I replied. "Neither of them will bother us at all. But I promised my dad we'd all be responsible, and nobody would drink any alcohol. Drugs aren't a question because both teams can be randomly tested, but beer could get my dad in serious trouble with the law."

"Congratulations, Lee," he said, speaking about himself. "You can be killed fighting for your country, but no fucking way you can have a legal beer!"

"You aren't enlisting, are you?" D'Andra asked.

"No, but I had to register for the draft when I turned eighteen last month. If I don't, no scholarships, grant money, or federal student loans. I'm sorry, but if you can be drafted, you should be able to legally drink."

"No need to apologize," Pete said. "I bet everyone here agrees with you."

There were nods and words of assent from everyone in the sauna.

"What about other stuff?" Destinee asked.

"Europe has it right," I said. "Fifteen for most everything except voting and driving. Some are higher, but Germany is fourteen for age of consent, beer, and wine. I know Sweden is stricter, with eighteen to buy or consume, but none of them are idiotic like the US at twenty-one for alcohol, or completely insane like California with 18 as the age of consent and no close-in-age exemption. Illinois is almost as bad. Ohio, where my mom and dad grew up, is saner -- it's sixteen and as low as thirteen as long as you're close in age."

"Control freaks," Keisha declared. "It's like with abortion -- old men telling girls and women what they can do with their bodies. It's none of their fucking business!"

"They believe you fucking IS their business," Elena declared.

"People just need to mind their own business," Lee declared. "About ALL that stuff."

"Amen, Brother!" Glen declared.

 Steve

"You were right, it *did* get weirder!" Emma declared as we cleaned up after I fulfilled her request.

"You asked for it," I chuckled. "Directly, not just by daring Loki to make it weirder!"

"When you have threesomes, do the girls do stuff together?"

"Some do, some don't. Most experimented once or twice, and that was the extent of it. A few discovered they were bisexual, and one discovered she was lesbian."

"Discovered?"

"The 70s were seriously repressive and her attempts to conform to social norms led to all manner of problems, including alcohol abuse and drugs. She thought, for a time, she might be bisexual, but once she was in a loving, caring relationship with another young woman in a place that was more tolerant than a rural county east of Cincinnati, she realized she was purely lesbian."

"I'm going to ask a question which you absolutely can refuse to answer, but your wives?"

"We all sleep together in the same bed, with all that implies, whether I'm there or not."

"That puts a different spin on it. Your girlfriends?"

"Both are completely straight," I replied. "Just as I am."

"No interest in experimenting?"

"None."

"I have a physiology question -- how many times?"

"Given we've spaced them out somewhat, probably eight total before midnight. But my tongue doesn't wear out!"

Emma laughed, "You said your jaw hurt a bit."

"A minor inconvenience," I replied.

"Twice your preferred way, and the other one a good, hard fucking?"

"Same as before?"

"Absolutely."

 Jesse

When we finished in the sauna, everyone took turns rinsing off -- the guys using the basement shower and the girls the one off the kitchen, and then we went up to the attic room to listen to music and hang out.

"Anyone want to play *Twister*?" Luna asked, seeing the box on the shelf. "Two guys, two girls?"

"Naked?" Simone asked with a smirk.

"I think that violates Jesse's agreement with his dad," Luna said.

"If everyone was seventeen, there wouldn't be a problem," I said. "The sauna could be explained because nobody touched each other, but *Twister* involves touching pretty much no matter what you do."

"Bummer!" Simone declared.

We played fully clothed, and it was still fun, and everyone laughed hard at some of the contortions necessary to avoid being eliminated. Besides *Twister*, some people played *Catan* and *Pirate's Cove*, and at 5:30pm, our pizzas were delivered. We ate, then went upstairs to the attic room, this time to dance.

"Jesse, put on a CD of slow songs," Luna suggested. "Then we'll pair off, dance, and change partners after every song until every guy has had a slow dance with every girl."

"Naked?" Simone teased, causing everyone to laugh.

"You know why Baptists don't have sex standing up, right?" Destinee asked.

"Because it might lead to dancing," I replied, having heard the joke from Dad, causing everyone to laugh.

"I think that would be an even bigger violation of Jesse's promise," Luna said.
"But too bad!"

"You're just no fun, Luna!" Simone declared. "We need to have a party for Juniors and Seniors!"

"Actually, it would have to be seventeen and up, so we stay out of trouble," I corrected. "I don't turn seventeen until February."

"Valentine's Day?" Simone suggested.

"Let me think about it," I replied.

I put in the disk and everyone paired off, with me dancing with Luna first. When the song ended, the girls moved to their right, and Simone was my partner.

"I really want to dance naked with you," she whispered as we swayed back and forth.

"I have to clear that with my dad," I replied. "And he's going to verify everyone is at least seventeen."

"Maybe I'll arrange a private party with you in January!" she whispered, grinding against me.

"Talk to me when school starts again," I replied.

"I will!"

After our dance finished, we swapped, and I danced with Tyra, Keisha, Luna, Tanisha, Shelly, Elena, Destinee, Ayana, Jazlyn, Daniela, Brandi, Simone, and D'Andra, and finally Chung Cha.

"You don't have a girlfriend, right?" Chung Cha asked as we danced, her body pressed tightly against mine.

"No."

"My parents are out of town...if you want to be together."

Despite being used to being around pretty girls, and having had them rubbing their bodies against mine, I hadn't had a reaction until the pretty Korean girl had suggested being together. Chung Cha noticed and ground against the bulge in my jeans.

"STD test?" I asked.

"Yes. And on the Pill."

"I have to be up early tomorrow, so I can go to church."

"That's OK."

"Then stay the night, if you want."

"I do," she whispered, then put her head on my chest and tightened her arms around me.

 Steve

"What High School would you recommend?" Emma asked as we lounged in a bubble bath late on Saturday evening after having completed our three additional rounds.

"Lane Tech," I replied. "It's selective admission, but I'm positive you'd pass the necessary tests and meet the admission requirements. Between Samantha, your dad, and me, we should be able to ensure you can transfer there."

"How long have you known Ms. Spurgeon?"

"Since just before her sixteenth birthday."

"NO!" Emma said, laughing. "Seriously?"

"You inferred from the simple fact that I met her when she was fifteen that she and I slept together?"

"I'm going to wager that you do not have a single friend over the age of fourteen you haven't slept with!"

"You'd lose that bet," I replied.

"OK, then the percentage you haven't slept with is so small as to be meaningless except to the girl in question!"

I tweaked both of Emma's nipples hard in response.

"That tells me I'm right," she exclaimed.

"Perhaps," I replied. "But I cannot name names nor reveal those specific confidences."

"You obviously have a thing for teenage girls; besides your first, how many have been older?"

"Very few," I replied. "And with one exception, the age difference was no more than two or three years."

"How much older?"

"Fifteen years, about a year ago."

"Did you avoid older women?"

"Not specifically, no, but I tend to be the prey, not the predator."

"And girls just come up to you and ask you to go to bed with them?"

"That has happened, but with few exceptions, they receive a mindfuck before a regular one."

"A 'mindfuck'?"

"A conversation with the goal of breaking down their social programming and freeing them from the constraints of what passes for public morality and regimented thinking. Or as my wives have said, I prefer to open their minds before I open their thighs."

Emma laughed, "Nice! You didn't do that with me, though."

"I told my wives that YOU did the mindfuck! Remember, I called you my intellectual equal?"

"But you're totally open-minded."

"Yes, but it's also about who has the upper hand in a conversation such as that one. It's nearly always me. You're one of the few who immediately seized and held the high ground. And for complete disclosure, I find that *very* sexy."

"I shouldn't be surprised by that given your wives are a medical doctor, a PhD research professor, and a pre-law student."

"I've always preferred smart girls; the smarter the better."

"Opposite what I've seen in High School," Emma replied. "And even with the college guys I've hung out with. They're all intimidated."

"Your goal is to find the guy who isn't; that's the one you marry, assuming that's your plan."

"Eventually, but around age twenty-five, at the earliest. How does it work if I date?"

"So long as you don't have a steady boyfriend, and any guy you do more than kiss with has a clean STI test, there's no concern on my part. I don't condone cheating and won't be party to it. As I mentioned, my wives know I'm here, and do not have a problem with it. They'll be amused that I ended up in 'Luckiest Dumb Boy' territory again."

"You're going to have to explain that one."

"My sister has called me a 'dumb boy' since we were kids, and later, a young woman I dated in Sweden called me «jävla idiot», which means 'fucking idiot'. Both were well deserved. 'Luckiest Dumb Boy' is when a perfect girl shows up, wants to fuck, and is a virgin."

"So your fetish is actually teen virgins, not just teens?"

"Yes, but as I've grown older, the opportunities have been reduced, and I'm in a slow transition period."

"Meaning?"

"Around my birthday, I'll begin refusing most approaches, maybe even all."

"Why?"

"Call it a mental block, or whatever you will, but turning forty puts me at more than twice the age of a twenty-year-old, let alone a sixteen-year-old. Will I *always* say 'no'? Probably not."

"I'm curious, but does your transitional thinking mean you'd have said 'no' to me?"

"I seriously hate 'what if?' questions because they're idle speculation. There is no way to know what might have happened if things had been different, and you can't go back and change things, nor predict how you might react in the future with any kind of certainty. That said, I suspect you would have succeeded in getting me into your bed even with my new thinking. Let me ask you a similar question -- how old is too old for you?"

"I'm not sure there's a specific age," she replied. "I was attracted to you, and as I said, you look like you're about thirty. If you looked old, I probably wouldn't have been attracted; no offense."

"None taken," I replied. "We can't control attraction, only action."

"What's the plan for next Saturday?" she asked.

"I'll pick you up at the same time, we'll have breakfast again, but we'll need use the playroom at home, as the apartment will be in use."

"Playroom?"

"The house has servant's quarters just off the kitchen. Our nannies used it over the years, and now it's been dubbed my 'playroom' by my wives. Nobody is allowed in our bed except the four of us."

"That makes sense, but literally every time I ask a question, the answer is mind-blowing!"

"Wait until you meet my kids!" I chuckled.

 Jesse

Around 11:15pm, most of the guests had left, but Lee, Pete, Luna, and Chung Cha had stayed to help clean up. The house wasn't very messy, but there were quite a few empty cans to collect and put in the recycling bin, the floor in the attic room needed to be swept, and the sauna needed to be wiped down. Luna left first, because her dad had arrived to walk her home, and shortly after, Lee and Pete left, in Lee's car. Once they had driven away, I took Chung Cha's hand and led her into the coach house.

"Do you want to be called by your Korean name or your nickname?" I asked as I led her upstairs.

"Either one is OK, and almost everyone calls me Shauna because my name is so different."

"What does it mean?" I asked as we went into my room and I shut the door.

"It literally means 'noble daughter' or 'righteous daughter'," she replied.

"Do you have your test paper?"

"Yes, of course! I remember what Luna said."

She showed me her test paper and her prescription, though on that I would have trusted her. I reciprocated, then turned on my stereo and put in a CD.

"Want to dance?" I asked.

"Naked?" she asked with a smile.

I nodded and began undressing and she did the same, then we took each other in our arms, she pressed her naked body against mine, put her head on my shoulder, and we began to sway gently with the music. Chung Cha was taller than most of the Oriental girls I knew, and was only about three inches shorter than me, with long legs, small boobs, and a neatly trimmed V of black pubic hair.

She was, like all the girls on the softball team, in great shape with great muscle tone, including very firm butt cheeks which I enjoyed running my hands over as we danced. As the team shortstop, she had cat-like reflexes, and I was absolutely positive she was going to be a wildcat in bed. We danced to two songs before she

lifted her head and we exchanged a soft kiss, our tongues tangling with each other.

After a minute, I scooped her into my arms and laid her on the bed. I climbed in after her, we kissed for a bit, then I lowered my head to her boob and licked and sucked her nipple for a minute before switching to the other one, then kissing my way down her body. She was soaking wet, so after planting a few kisses on her labia, I moved on top of her.

"Be gentle," she whispered as I positioned myself against her. "I'm a virgin."

I nodded, kissed her softly, and slowly pushed forward, my glans parting her labia and entering her hot, slick pussy. A few gentle thrusts and I was fully inside her, enjoying the tightness and the soft ripples of her muscles massaging my shaft. Chung Cha wrapped her arms and legs around me and squeezed them tightly. I waited another minute, then began thrusting slowly in and out, with Chung Cha matching my movements.

After perhaps a dozen thrusts, she began moving more urgently, and my prediction of her behavior in bed was proven true -- she began humping wildly and I thrust harder and harder until we were fucking wildly. After a couple of minutes, she broke the kiss, tightened her body, and groaned loudly as she had her first orgasm of the night.

V. You Have a Waiver

December 29, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"I'm sorry we had to be up so early," I said to Chung Cha when we went to the shower on Sunday morning.

"It's OK!" she replied. "I'm sorry I didn't let you get very much sleep!"

"I am NOT going to complain!" I said as we stepped under the spray.

Only a complete moron would object to losing sleep to have hours of amazing sex with a gorgeous virgin girl, especially receiving her first-ever blowjob! We'd screwed five times -- me on top, her on top, sitting, doggy-style, and me on top again, with a blowjob after her being on top, and sixty-nine before our last time. I'd cum seven times, and only managed about two hours of sleep, but as I'd thought, there was no way I was going to complain.

"Do you think we could keep doing this," she asked. "I mean, I won't be able to spend the night, but maybe one afternoon a week after school?"

I almost laughed because if things went the way they appeared to be going, I'd be back to the «filles du jour» situation I'd had during the previous school year. My only concern was what Zahra might think, but in the end, she wasn't going to become a Christian and I wasn't going to convert to Islam, so it had to eventually end.

"I'd like that," I said.

"Good!" she exclaimed.

We finished in the shower, dried off, went back to my room to dress, and then went downstairs. My moms weren't up, so I wrote on the board that I was going to church, then went across the yard to the main house to get the keys to my dad's BMW. I saw Dad and Birgit cuddling, said 'hi', then left the house. Chung Cha and I got into the car and I drove her to her house, where we exchanged a kiss and said we'd see each other at school.

Five minutes later, I picked up Luna at her house. She waited until I had turned the corner and stopped at a stop sign to give me a kiss.

"I do not want my dad to be suspicious!" she declared as I pulled away from the stop sign.

"Right, because getting up before 7:00am on Sunday to go to church with me doesn't imply anything at all!"

Luna laughed, "I'm a pure, innocent girl who is going to church with a very faithful boy! What could possibly happen?"

"And you think your parents actually believe that?" I asked with a grin.

"Plausible deniability is all I need!" she declared.

 Birgit

"Where is Kjell?" Dad asked as we cuddled on Sunday morning.

"He's still in bed," I replied. "I might have worn him out last night!"

"You are absolutely your mother's daughter," Dad chuckled. "How are things with Kjell besides the obvious 'horny teenager' activities?"

"Good, actually. He and I had a good talk about our relationship, and I'll absolutely see him when I'm in Sweden, but I'm hoping to live in Gothenburg the same as you."

"You can request that, but unless there's a family arranged, you more or less get the luck of the draw."

"Would any of your friends be interested in hosting an exchange student?"

"I honestly don't know, but I certainly can ask. And you know there's always Katt and Mikael."

"True, but they live WAY up north and that would make it tough to see Kjell the way you saw Pia. What about her?"

"She was the one I was going to call first," Dad said. "The others I'll speak to are Suzanne Fjällman, who has a son Ashley's age, or Suzana Jonsson, the daughter of the family I stayed with. She has two boys, who are ten and seven."

"Well, that won't cramp my style!" I declared.

Dad laughed, "Which is the major consideration! I assume you'd like to go to the same «gymnasiet»?"

"Yes! And study the same natural sciences curriculum."

"I'll make the calls and see what they all think. We have plenty of time. You won't even submit your application until September of next year. Will you survive a year without Dad cuddles?"

"I'll have to, won't I?" I said.

"Yes."

"Of course, you could give me something to remember you by!" I teased.

"I'll pick up a necklace or bracelet for you!" Dad teased back.

"So long as it's a 'pearl necklace', yes!"

"Birgit Elizabeth!" Dad exclaimed, but he was laughing. "Where did you learn THAT?"

From Rachel, but there was no way I was going to tell Dad!

"On advice of counsel, I exercise my Fifth Amendment right to remain silent, as the answer might tend to incriminate someone I care about!"

"You can't take the Fifth for that reason!" Dad objected.

"Says you! There is no way I'm going to tell you who told me about that! Well, that's not true! Give me one and I'll tell you!"

"Pumpkin..."

"Sorry," I said quickly. "You know I'm teasing."

"You are, but you also aren't."

"You know I love you, Dad."

"I do. And I love you, Birgit Elizabeth."

 Steve

After breakfast, I went to my study to place a call to Pia.

"Steve?!" she exclaimed. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know Birgit is planning to apply to the exchange program and this morning she told me she would like to live in Gothenburg and go to Schillerska. I wondered if you, Harry, and Marta could accept a temporary daughter and sister."

"I'd love to, but Harry as a two-year assignment in London starting next June, so we'll be living there for two years."

"How does that work for you?"

"Volvo is accommodating, and I'll work for them in the UK for two years."

"That sounds like fun. What does Marta think?"

"She likes the idea," Pia replied. "You have to make sure you stop in London if you come to Europe in the next two years."

"I'm not sure what my travel schedule looks like, but I'm sure Albert would be happy to visit when he's in England next summer."

"Still hooked on his Yorkshire girl?"

"Very much so! Did you have a good Christmas?"

"We did. You?"

"Yes, and we had the usual circus on Boxing Day."

"It's always pure crazy around you, Steve!" Pia exclaimed.

"I know," I chuckled.

We spoke for a few minutes, then ended the call. My next call was to Suzanne Fjällman. Her son Sven answered and called his mom to the phone. She was equally surprised by my call, but the answer I received to my question was the same as Pia's, but for a much different and depressing reason.

"Jakob and I separated in August," she said. "And it's not likely we'll get back together. Right now, I can't say 'yes' because I'm not sure where Sven and I will be living once the divorce I'm sure is coming is final."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"It happens. You know my mom was divorced, and we did fine."

"I know I'm 5,000 kilometers away, but if there's anything I can do to help, let me know."

"I will. You should come visit."

"I don't have any definitive plans, but I promise to let you know when I do. You and Sven are always welcome to visit us here if you need to get away."

"Thanks."

We chatted for a few more minutes, and after we ended the call, I placed a third call, which resulted in a different and positive answer.

"It's too bad my boys aren't older!" Suzana exclaimed. "Paying off bets is fun!"

"You'll get no argument from me on that one!"

"Between you and me, that was *the* best day of my life, bar none! I say a 'thank you' to Viktor Tikhonov every time I think about it!"

I chuckled, "If he'd pulled Tretiak, I might not have scored!"

"And that would have been a travesty!" Suzana replied. "I'll speak to Karl, but I'm sure it'll be OK. I'll get in touch with the YFU office in Stockholm and find out what we need to do."

"Thanks. Birgit will very much appreciate it."

We spoke for another ten minutes, then I went to find Birgit to let her know.

"Cool!" she exclaimed. "Thanks, Dad!"

"It's not guaranteed, obviously, but I can't imagine there will be any problems."

She gave me a hug, then I went to the Indian Room to join Kara and Suzanne. Jessica was working her usual Sunday shift, and the three of us had walked her to work before Suzanne, Birgit, and I had run, something we didn't always do on Sundays, but we'd missed a few days during the holidays, and the dojo was closed, so we needed the exercise.

"Any luck?" Kara asked.

"Yes, and some news. The good news is that Pia's husband Harry is being sent to London for two years, and she's arranged a transfer with Volvo to work in England. The bad news is that Suzanne Fjällman is separated and will likely divorce. The success was with Suzana Jonsson, who said that she and Karl would be happy to have Birgit. She also lamented that her boys are too young to collect on bets!"

Kara and Suzanne both laughed.

"Changing subjects, is there anything we need for Tuesday?" Kara asked.

"Not that I can think of. I don't recall if I mentioned we're having an impromptu, informal Philosophy Club meeting. Audrey, Nalani, and Emma are really interested, and enough people will be here that we can have a decent session."

"I'll be very curious to hear what Dmitry has to say!" Kara declared.

"They won't be here until around 4:00pm, and we'll be done about then. And I think Dmitry will have an immediate conversation with Jesse!"

Kara and Suzane laughed again.

"You have to watch out for those Russian girls," Kara declared.

"Steve survived sleeping with the daughter of a KGB protective officer," Suzanne observed. "I think Jesse will manage with a retired general of tanks!"

"I think Jesse is smart enough to not do anything that would cause Larisa to complain to her dad," I replied.

"Have you considered saying anything to the kids about their Russian ancestry?" Kara asked quietly.

I quickly shut the door to the Indian room.

"Honey, please do not bring up that topic in any way."

"Sorry," Kara replied. "I thought you were going to tell them."

"At some point, but I don't want them to associate Steve Samet's visit with any new information about our family, and I'll need to find a way to tell them that doesn't implicate my dad in anything. The larger problem is how to keep them from asking my dad about it, because that could quickly spiral out of control."

"Your thinking seems to have changed a bit," Suzanne observed.

"It's a fluid situation, and my thinking is evolving," I replied. "My next step, sometime next week, is to sign up for ancestry.com and do some research, though I'll be careful not to link anything, just gather information. Anyway, I'm going to get some tea. Would either of you like some?"

"Yes, please," they both replied.

[Loveland, Ohio]

 Matthew

"You've never been to church with your brother?" Chelsea asked as we turned into the parking lot at Saint George Orthodox Church in Loveland.

"No. We went a few times when I was little, but I barely remember. My dad used to go for their Easter celebrations, but I don't think he's been in years. He did help Jesse's church with their building project, and I know he's done some financial management seminars. But Dad is more in tune with Loki than Christianity. You stopped going when you moved to Chicago."

"I knew you weren't interested and church was never important to me the way it was to Mom."

Chelsea parked, we got out of the car, then walked to the front doors where Pavel greeted us. He led us into the church where we saw Larisa, Rachel, Viktoria, April, and Mark. We followed them into the worship hall, which Pavel called the 'nave' and sat in pews about halfway forward. I would have preferred to sit in the back, but the other kids were all Orthodox, so they wanted to be further forward.

I had no real memory of being in church when I was little, and I found the service both interesting and tedious at the same time, and when it ended more than three hours after it had begun, I felt as if I was being released from custody. We left the worship hall and joined everyone in the parish hall for lunch.

"What did you think?" Pavel asked.

"It was long," I replied.

"I agree," Chelsea said. "At my mom's church, the mass lasts less than an hour."

The priest came over to us and Pavel introduced him.

"This is my dad, Father Stephen; Dad, our friends Matthew and Chelsea, from Chicago."

I shook hands with him, and he asked the usual polite questions, invited us back, then moved on to speak to other people.

After we ate, Chelsea and I left the church to head to Batavia to see some of her High School friends.

"What did you really think?" she asked once we'd pulled out of the parking lot.

"That, in addition to being long, it was tedious! So much was repeated that you could probably cut the service in half if you took out all the repeated stuff!"

Chelsea laughed softly, "That sounds just like you! Looking for the most efficient way to do something! I'm glad you don't do that in bed!"

"I would think you'd be happy if I discovered an efficient way to bring you to orgasm!"

"You brat!" Chelsea exclaimed. "You know it's about more than that!"

"Says the girl who begs for more!" I teased.

"Because I love you!"

"And I love you, too!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

My sister, Joel, Patty, and Davey walked into the house just after 10:00am, which was a surprise.

"What are you doing here so early?" I asked.

"We were next door and thought we'd drop in!"

"Is something going on with Terry and Penny?" I asked, concerned.

"Next door on the other side!" Stephanie replied. "The open house."

"I didn't know you were into crime scene tours!" I teased.

"We put in an offer," she said. "All cash."

"I'd say we're paying you too much, but I know where that money came from!"

"So sue me if I made a pile of cash at Spurgeon!" Stephanie exclaimed.

"I don't recall giving permission for you to move next door, Squirt!"

"As if I'd need my dumb brother's permission!"

"What did you offer?"

"The listing price; it's a bit lower than market given recent history, and we want it. I'm positive they'll accept given that it was only listed a week ago."

"Contingent on selling your old place?"

"No, but I don't think that'll be a problem. The houses on our street sell fairly quickly, and they're around the median price for Kenwood, unlike your house!"

"Which would be tough to afford now, given the major increase in property values since Dad and I bought it!"

"We're going to head home, but we'll be back for the family dinner," Stephanie said.

She and I hugged, I shook hands with Joel, who had been quiet, as was his usual practice, then received hugs from my niece and nephew. Once they had left, I let Kara and Suzanne know the news.

"I didn't see THAT coming!" Kara exclaimed. "But it's also not surprising that your sister would want to buy a bigger house than the one she and Ed bought together."

"I agree," I said. "And the price is right, because they undervalued it by about ten percent due to it being the 'Murder House', as everyone in the neighborhood calls it."

"It'll always have the moniker," Suzanne observed. "Well, for a generation, probably."

"Did anything happen with the murder case against Pete Williams?" Kara asked.

"No. I'm not sure what kind of plea bargain he could make, given there's a moratorium on the death penalty being carried out, and I don't see that ever being lifted. He's going to get life without parole, assuming what the detective said about the evidence being damning is true. The only surprising thing is that the kids put the house on the market so quickly."

"Don't you think they had to?" Kara asked. "They're living with their grandmother and there's no way they'd move back into the house where their mom was murdered."

"I don't disagree, it was just really fast."

"The kids will be set, though, right?" Suzanne asked.

"There was a mortgage on the house," I replied. "But given the appreciation in property values, even with the 'Murder House' discount, it'll pay off the note and leave them enough to cover college for both kids, though both of them are supposedly good enough to earn gridiron football scholarships."

Kara laughed softly, "You've adopted your kids' view of what 'football' means!"

"Given I have so many friends overseas and staff who follow European and South American football leagues, that shouldn't really be a surprise! Not to mention Eduardo calling it fútbol. Anyway, I need to change and walk over to Libby's house."

I went upstairs, changed out of the sweatpants and rugby shirt I wore to lounge around the house, and put on khakis and a long-sleeve button-down shirt. I gargled with Listerine, then went downstairs to kiss my wives. That accomplished, I got my fedora, coat, and gloves from the foyer closet, put them on, and headed out the front door.

I was leaving a bit early so I could take a leisurely, indirect walk, more to have some 'alone time' than anything else. With all my commitments to family, karate, and work, and friends, along with my dalliances, I didn't have a lot of time by myself. Of course, I didn't want too much time alone, but some was necessary.

As I walked, I considered what I'd said to Emma, which echoed what I'd said to my wives as well. If the trip to Saint Martin happened, future dalliances with anyone under twenty would be rare exceptions, if they occurred at all. For one thing, the criminal penalties were becoming harsher and harsher, as people like my mom, Kent van der Meer, and Tim Sadler were winning the argument in a bizarre alliance with so-called progressives, who had abandoned their position of the 60s for free love, free expression, and treating teens as adults.

That unholy partnership was pushing the idea that young adults in college were still 'children', in the sense that they needed to be 'protected' from 'adults'. The Republican Party had been captured by evangelical, fundamentalist prudes, and had, for the most part, rejected Ronald Reagan's views on government. If the creation of the Department of Homeland Security didn't prove that, FISA courts certainly did.

People had, as they nearly always did, traded their freedom for security theatre. It was always a losing proposition, and sadly, the trend was continuing, to the point where an Orwellian surveillance state was being created, and Americans were fast approaching the point where denouncing your neighbor was an acceptable thing to do. The US and the East Bloc had, in effect, swapped positions, with the East Bloc -- including Russia which was being led by Vladimir Putin, a man I had met when he held a different role -- moving towards freedom and the US moving towards totalitarianism.

As I walked up to the front door of Libby's house, I pushed those thoughts aside to focus on the seventeen-year-old -- and legal -- young woman who had chosen me for what she called her 'first fuck with an adult'. As I reached for the doorbell, the door was flung open and Libby grabbed my arm and pulled me inside, causing me to laugh.

"Somebody is impatient!" I chuckled.

"Somebody doesn't want nosy neighbors seeing her with an older guy when her parents are out of town! The last thing I want to do is have trouble with my parents!"

"Well, I'm all yours for the next six hours."

"Six hours; six times! Or is age messing with your refractory period?"

"I may not be a teenager, but I'm also not old enough to have encountered that problem; at least not yet!"

"Let's go upstairs!" Libby exclaimed.

I followed her up to her room, which was large and nicely appointed, with an ensuite bath.

"Did you have a plan?" I asked as she shut the door.

Libby licked her lips, winked, then said, "First, I'm going to give you an amazing blowjob. After that, you're going to lick me to a bunch of orgasms, then we fuck! You on top, followed by sixty-nine until you're ready again, then me on top. We break for some food, then sixty-nine and sex again, followed by a tit fuck where you cum on my face. Then sixty-nine so you can complete the 'around the world tour'. The last time is whatever you want, no limits, no restrictions. Is that wild enough?"

"I'd say," I chuckled.

"I thought about inviting a friend, but I decided I want you all to myself!"

"That's probably best," I replied. "Am I correct in assuming this is a one-off?"

"It think it has to be," Libby replied. "I really don't want anyone besides you, me, and Jesse to know!"

"That makes complete sense."

She went to her desk and extracted an envelope.

"My permission slip!" she declared.

I confirmed the recent date on the clean STI test and handed it back. Libby put the envelope back in the drawer, then turned to face me.

"And now, for your viewing pleasure, a sexy seventeen-year-old body!" she exclaimed.

I watched as she removed her jeans, t-shirt, bra, and panties, revealing large, firm breasts, a flat stomach, and a perfectly smooth mons, devoid of any hair.

"Well, that answers *that* question," I chuckled.

"Do you prefer shaved, trimmed, or untamed?"

"Trimmed," I replied. "Not that I'm dumb enough to reject the alternatives!"

"Any pussy available to you is perfect?" Libby asked with a smirk.

"The same as with any breasts I'm allowed to fondle, kiss, and suck are just fine!"

"Most guys prefer big boobs and shaved pussies, or so the internet seems to indicate."

"I'd take anything I read or saw on the internet about sex with a truckload of salt," I chuckled.

"Obviously! Your turn!"

I quickly removed my clothes and stood naked a few feet from Libby.

"You're in really good shape!" she exclaimed.

"For an old guy?" I asked with a smirk.

"Oh, please! Thirty-nine is not old! Isn't Jesse's grandpa eighty-five?"

"Yes."

"That's old! And even he's in good shape, considering!"

"He certainly is."

"Get into my bed so I can give you an amazing blowjob!"

"You realize that only a great fool would say a blowjob was 'bad' if the girl lets him cum in her mouth, right?"

"And you're not a great fool?"

"I clearly must choose the sexy teenager in front of me!"

"Wise decision!"

I climbed into the bed and propped myself with pillows so I could watch. Libby climbed in after me, sliding down and planting a kiss on the glans of my already erect dick. The vision of a girl fellating me made the experience all the more enjoyable, and Libby's promise of an amazing blowjob was fulfilled as she used her lips, tongue, mouth, and hands to pleasure me.

With Libby being experienced, I held out for as long as I could, and she continued the enthusiastic, extremely pleasurable blowjob until I groaned deeply, and pulsed, filling her mouth with my cum as Libby lashed my glans with her tongue, stroked me, and gently squeezed my sack. When the pulses

subsided, Libby released me and moved up so we could share our first kiss, which, unsurprisingly, was with her mouth still full of my cum.

"Amazing?" Libby asked after she broke the fierce kiss two minutes later.

"Amazing!" I agreed.

"Your turn!"

She moved to her back, and I began with her firm breast which were capped with large, brown nipples, licking and sucking for several minutes before I moved down between her legs, kissed her labia, then pressed my tongue between them, coating it with her coppery juices. Libby had a prominent clit, making it easy for me to bring her off multiple times. I wasn't sure how she defined 'a bunch', so after four orgasms from my tongue, I moved up, positioned myself, and slid smoothly into her silky tunnel.

Libby hadn't specified *how* she wanted to fuck, so I defaulted to my preference of slow thrusts, grinding against her every few thrusts, giving her five orgasms over the next twenty minutes before pushing as deeply into her as I could and pumping cum into her spasming pussy.

"Totally NOT what I expected!" Libby declared when I stopped thrusting after our mutual orgasms had passed.

"Believe it or not, that's my preferred way. I promise to pound you into the mattress later, if that's what you want."

"That wasn't an objection, by the way, because I had five great orgasms! I just expected you to be more vigorous."

I chuckled, "I promise the last time will be what I've called raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fucking where I'll pound you as hard as I can, then pull out and cum in your mouth."

Libby laughed, "Challenge: Accepted!"

 Jesse

After church, Luna and I met Mikey, Nicole, Jerry, Mia, Birgit, and Kjell at Bacino's on Wacker Drive for pizza.

"Bummer of the day," Nicole said, "my parents are coming to your dad's New Year's party!"

I laughed, "It's not as if it's a Bacchanalian gathering! And besides, we'll spend most of our time at Amber's house with the teens and tweens. The youngest kids will be in the coach house with two chaperones. We won't have any, though Terry will check on us about once an hour just to keep the parents happy."

"A lot can happen in an hour," Mikey smirked.

"Graduation can't get here soon enough!" Nicole declared.

"It's 2004 for Jesse, you, and Mikey, right?" Mia asked.

"Yes. I think Luna is a Senior."

"I am," Luna said. "I'm going to Arizona State next Fall."

That made me think of CeCe, and I wondered how she was doing.

"Scholarship?" Nicole asked.

"Partial," Luna replied. "It's tough to get a spot on a Division I team, because there are something like 300,000 High School softball players and only 5000 Div I roster spots."

"Hockey is probably about the same," Nicole said. "Mikey and I are hoping to be scouted together, but that's going to be tough because there are so few girls' teams. All the schools with girls' teams have guys' teams, so if I am recruited, I'll let the scouts know they need to convince the men's team to recruit Mikey."

"You guys are that serious?" Mia asked.

"I'll marry the idiot if he ever asks!" Nicole declared.

"You guys are sixteen, right?" Mia inquired.

"Mikey turned seventeen in October; I turn seventeen in March. But I'm sure he's the right guy!"

"And I have no way to support a wife," Mikey said. "So she's just going to have to wait. And it's not as if she's not getting the milk for free now!"

We all laughed at Mikey turning around the usual comment about guys.

"Will you face each other in the playoffs?" Luna asked.

"Not until the finals, if we both make it," I replied. "The round-robin is two sets of four teams, and the winners play for the city championship. We'd play the suburban champs in the first round of the regionals, then the winner of the collar county champs. If we win THAT, we go to Springfield for the state championship, with three other regional winners."

"How many teams are in the first round?" Luna asked.

"Eight from the city, eight from the burbs. We play three other city teams in the round-robin stage. Our big advantage for winning is that our group includes four, six, and eight, while the other is two, three, five, and seven."

"Who's in your group?"

"Chicago Latin, Lane Tech, and Saint Patrick Catholic. We play the winner of the group with British International, Brother Rice, St. Rita, and De La Salle."

"Our group is tougher," Nicole said. "We have Waubonsie Valley, Naperville Central, and Glenbard East. We beat Glenbard but lost to the two Naperville teams."

"By one goal each," Mikey said. "And those were our only two losses to teams in the burbs. We only lost to Jesse's team and Brother Rice in the city."

The waiter brought our pizza, and that was the end of the conversation as six hungry kids dug into the deep-dish pan pizza.

 Steve

"Another surprise," Libby declared. "I never expected THAT, either!"

I chuckled, "If I had no problem French kissing after the blowjob when you hadn't swallowed, and putting my tongue in your pussy after I'd cum there, I'm not sure how licking my cum off your face and chest is such a surprise!"

"I guess I just didn't know what to expect from you. As much as I've flirted and teased, I had no idea what you liked or what you wanted to do. And I promised myself no comparisons."

"Wise."

"Now that I've crossed 'father and son' off my bucket list, have you had a mother and daughter?"

"More than once," I chuckled. "And the opportunity for one I passed up."

"OK, I have to ask -- why?"

"I was fifteen and was WAY more interested in my friend than her mom, and my friend would have objected."

"Twins?"

"Yes, together, even."

"I'd ask about multiple partners, but you're married to three women, so I think that's a sure thing!"

I chuckled, "I had my first foursome when I was fifteen. And for my twentieth birthday, there were five girls, but serially, not simultaneously."

"How old were you your first time? Fourteen?"

"Yes, and she was nine years older."

"Jesse was my first, and only, guy; I've been with six different girls."

"You're dating Lilibeth now, right?"

"Yes, but it's temporary. She's going to BC when she graduates, and I'm going to Harvard. She also is like Mom One and wants nothing at all to do with a dick penetrating her. She's not even interested in experimenting."

"Don't push that," I counseled.

"I know. I spoke with Mom One about it and she gave me good advice. I want a situation like yours, with a guy and a girl, so Lilibeth isn't really an option. I suspect I'll meet the right guy and girl at Harvard."

"What kind of law do you intend to practice?"

"I'm not sure. Criminal defense is cool, but the lawyers I spoken to, including Aunt Melanie, say it can be super frustrating."

"I do like how you talk like a member of the family," I replied.

"What's the saying? When in Rome? You know how much time Jesse and I have spent together and how close we are."

"True."

"Ready for the final stop on the round-the-world tour?"

"As I'll ever be!"

"Minus the erection you need, but sixty-nine will solve that! The lube is in the nightstand drawer."

 Ashley

"Have fun with Libby, Dad?" I asked with a sly smile when he came into the house late on Sunday afternoon.

"How the..." he asked, but had a smile.

"I think and I know things!" I smirked. "And I watch and listen! Your secret is safe with me!"

"And to think I called Birgit the 'Neighborhood Watch'," Dad chuckled, shaking his head.

"Aunt Stephanie said they're buying the house next door!" I said.

"She told me this morning," Dad replied. "I need to find Kara Mom and Suzanne so we can walk to the hospital to get your mom."

Dad left, and I went back to the kitchen to help Yuriko, Stephie, and Natalie with dinner.

"Dad's home," I announced. "He, Kara Mom, and Suzanne are leaving to get Mom from the hospital."

"Ashley-chan, would you stir the soup, please?" Yuriko asked.

"Of course!" I replied.

I went over to the stove, pushed the step-stool over, and climbed up. I picked up the wooden spoon, and stirred the pot, then tasted it.

"I think it needs a bit more onion and garlic," I said.

"Add small amounts, please," Yuriko instructed. "Then let it simmer a few minutes before you taste it again."

I added two pinches of garlic powder and two of onion powder, stirred them in, and waited two minutes before I tasted it again.

"Perfect!" I declared.

"Thank you! Would you make sure Albert set the table, please?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed, climbing down off the step-stool.

I walked to the dining room where I saw all the places were properly set. I returned to the kitchen and let Yuriko know Albert had done his chore, which, had he not, would have been shocking. He was the most 'squared away' person in the house, and even had all his shirts lined up by color, facing the same way, and evenly spaced in his closet!

 Steve

"How in the heck did Ashley know where I was?" I asked Kara as she, Suzanne, and I walked south on Woodlawn Avenue.

"What happened?" Kara inquired.

"She met me at the door and asked if I'd had fun with Libby! I did NOT say anything to her, and I'm sure none of you did, and Jesse didn't know it was going to be today, and he was out with his friends."

"She thinks, and she knows things!" Suzanne repeated. "Don't ask me how, but *nothing* takes her by surprise or gets past her!"

"TELL me about it," I chuckled. "Birgit wishes she was half as clued in as Ashley is!"

"They say it's the quiet ones you have to watch out for," Kara declared. "So, DID you have fun with Libby?"

"Yes. And today was a one-time thing. It's something she's wanted to do for some time, but she's not interested in trying to have a secret relationship."

"Was it as wild as she suggested?"

"Absolutely! Lots of sixty-nine, with three screws -- me on top my way, her riding me wildly, and a hardcore fuck at the end. There was also a tit fuck and, of course, she wanted the final stop on the 'round-the-world tour'."

"So you're all worn out now after Emma and Libby?"

"Invigorated," I countered. "But I'm going with my stated plan. Obviously I'll be with Avanti, but other than the potential Saint Martin trip, it'll wind down, and other than some rare exceptions, there won't be anyone under twenty-one."

"You still plan to fulfill Kristin Jaeger's request, right?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes, and her friend's as well. I mean new girls."

"We'll see!" Kara declared. "What about when Natalie leaves?"

"That's a few years in the future, and I'll worry about it then. And what do you mean by 'we'll see'?"

"You need your dose of virgin blood!" Kara exclaimed.

"And you need your voyeuristic fantasy fulfilled!" I chuckled.

"He didn't say never, Kara," Suzanne observed, "just rare exceptions. And if the trend I'm seeing with girls at UofC is representative, there won't be a shortage of twenty-one-year-old virgins who'll need a mindfuck, along with the other kind."

"Sadly," I replied. "Society is going to Hell in a handbasket."

"You could always provide stress relief for future doctors, too," Suzanne suggested. "Jessica is positive at least four or five of them would avail themselves of that service!"

I chuckled, "She's probably right about that, based on the flirting."

We reached the hospital and Jessica, Allyson, and Lucy walked out together.

"Hey, handsome!" Lucy said, surprising me with a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi," I replied.

"Can anyone do that?" Allyson asked.

"It's a free country," Jessica declared.

Allison stepped up and rather than a kiss on the cheek gave me a quick peck on the lips and winked.

"Later, Jess!" Allyson said, and she and Lucy walked away.

I hugged Jessica and gave her a kiss, then Kara and Suzanne hugged and kissed her, and the four of us began walking home.

"They'll be at the New Year's Eve party," Jessica said. "And you have a waiver!"

VI. Are You Trying to Confuse Me?

December 29, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

After dinner on Monday, my wives and I went to the Indian room to relax.

"I'm curious why you offered the waiver," I said to Jessica.

"I honestly don't think it would cause any problems," Jessica replied. "The same is true for the med students, given your seminars are optional and not graded. I totally understand making any NIKA employees totally off limits, but the hospital and medical school? No. That expands the pool of candidates, given your plan to implement a nobody under twenty-one rule, which I suggest should be eighteen."

"With rare exceptions, though, right?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes," I replied. "As I think about it, it could only be for 'cousins' whose parents wouldn't object, and honestly, there aren't many who've shown any kind of interest."

"There really aren't that many of them," Kara observed. "Amelia Tarrance and Alexa Katsaros are twelve and Amber Penfield is thirteen, so even they are a few years away. I believe Amber is a sure thing, but I don't think the other girls have expressed any interest or even flirted."

"They haven't," I replied.

"And neither Stephe nor Ashley would tolerate their friends receiving an 'expert deflowering'," Suzanne observed.

"As I said, the field is limited," Jessica interjected. "Obviously, it's up to you, Tiger, but as I aid, eighteen seems like an appropriate floor, with those other exceptions. Girls that age are in college or working full time."

"I was more concerned about the absolute age difference than anything," I replied.

"You need your dose of virgin blood, Snuggle Bear!" Kara declared. "Eighteen will be easier than twenty-one."

"Not the way the world is going," I replied. "But I will listen to my wives' counsel and take it under advisement."

"Are the plans set for Saint Martin?" Jessica asked.

"I spoke to the girls' moms today," Kara said. "They all gave permission, provided Steve and I chaperone, and we don't let the girls roam without supervision."

I chuckled and said, "That's not going to go over well with Her Royal Highness, Birgit the First of Kenwood!" I chuckled.

"I did get the moms to agree that the girls could go to the beach that's more or less across the street from the house," Kara said. "That should help."

We were interrupted by the phone ringing in my study. I got up and waked to answer it.

"Steve Adams," I said.

"Hi, it's Nadia! We keep playing phone and IM tag."

"Sorry about that. This time of year is very busy, and things were messed up by an emergency at work and my own failure to remember I had out-of-town guests arriving. Unfortunately, the next day I have free would be Friday, the 3rd of January."

"I suppose that will have to do. Maybe I should just tell you what I want to do, because it sounds as if our schedules won't easily match up. I wanted to do it face-to-face to be able to gauge your reaction. OK to just tell you?"

"Yes."

"I have two fantasies. The first one is being a sixteen-year-old virgin babysitter and seducing the hunky dad when he drives me home and my parents are out."

I chuckled, "The fantasy of every married guy who drives a nubile babysitter home, and probably quite a few of the babysitters."

"I was tempted a couple of times when I was fifteen and sixteen to actually try to seduce the dads of kids I was babysitting, but I chickened out."

"I never had the opportunity to seduce a babysitter or be seduced by one because we always had nannies for our kids. It sounds like fun. What's the other fantasy?"

"It's the dark one," Nadia said quietly. "I fantasized about losing my virginity to an older guy while I was tied up."

I was VERY uncomfortable with rape fantasies because of Bethany and Michelle, and I had turned down a similar request from Alicija Czerwinski, one of Birgit's grade school teachers.

"I have a serious concern about non-consensual sex," I replied. "Even simulated."

"You mean rape?" Nadia asked. "That's not what I mean. I'd beg you to do things, and you do them. Totally willing and totally consensual."

"I'm curious about how that fantasy developed."

"It's something that popped into my mind unbidden when I was thirteen and it became stronger as I got older. It's something I really want to do, and it's fantasy that could actually happen."

"Implying..."

"That I'm still a virgin. I've made out some, in both High School and when I was getting my Associate's degree, but I never met anyone I felt I could tell what I wanted. Nobody but Danielle knows about either of those fantasies, and if I have to choose one, it's the one that would be real. I hoped you would be willing to do both. Danielle wasn't sure, but she said you were the safest guy she'd ever met."

"Do you have both mapped out? The role playing and the dark fantasy?"

"Yes. For the babysitter fantasy, we would start at your house, with you coming home with your wives, then role play you driving me home. You would take me to my parents' house so we can use the bed I slept in while I was a teenager. It's OK because they're on a cruise and don't come home until the 4th. For the other one, you come to my apartment, or I come to your place. I have soft ropes if you don't have any. I could IM you a script beforehand so you know exactly what I want and are sure it's consensual."

"I need to think about that one, but the role playing one sounds fun. Let's plan for the 3rd, and I'll call or IM you about the bondage fantasy."

"OK. Talk to you soon! And please don't cancel again!"

"I do apologize for the circumstances."

We said 'goodbye' and I went back to the Indian room.

"That was Nadia, Danielle's friend," I said.

"Interesting fantasies?" Kara asked with a smirk.

I chuckled, "One I never had an opportunity to try -- the virginal teenage babysitter seducing the dad who drives her home."

All three of my wives laughed.

"You did get two nannies!" Jessica observed.

"Neither of them were virgins," Kara countered. "Winter was, but she wasn't actually a nanny, and she got Steve before we hired her as our domestic."

"All true," I said. "It would be total roleplaying, and a lot of fun. Her other fantasy is dark -- losing her virginity while tied to the bed. She insists it's not a rape fantasy and offered to provide the list of things she wanted done in the order she wanted them done in advance."

"You turned down Alicija Czerwinski," Kara observed.

I nodded, "Because it was quite clearly a rape fantasy. This one isn't so cut and dried. It's actually closer to what Elyse and I once did, where she had me tie her up and fuck her silly for hours."

"How did Nadia actually lose her virginity?" Suzanne asked. "If you know, that is."

"She didn't," I replied.

My wives all laughed once more.

"Luckiest Dumb Boy strikes again!" Kara declared. "She really wants to lose her virginity that way?"

"Yes. She said the idea simply sprang into her mind when she was thirteen, and has been growing stronger ever since. That doesn't surprise me, the growing stronger part, because the more she thinks about it, the more she'd want to do it. For her other fantasy, she was tempted several times when she was fifteen and sixteen, but never worked up the courage to actually try it."

"What are you going to do?" Jessica asked.

"Think about it," I replied. "Obviously, the babysitter fantasy is something I'd do, but the other one is questionable."

"We do stuff like that from time to time," Kara said. "And you did with Elyse."

I nodded, "I know, but I still want to think about it. It's one thing to play the way we do, in a well-established relationship. It's another thing entirely with a random deflowering. In any event, I'll see her on the 3rd."

"Is there anything we need to do before Jon and the family arrive?"

"I believe we have everything we need for them, and for the party. Is anyone up for a sauna?"

"Will you be up in the sauna?" Kara asked mischievously.

"If my wives wish that to be so, then it will be so!"



December 30, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"What are you doing today?" I asked Dad as we cuddled in the sunroom on Tuesday morning.

"Hanging out with Audrey, Brad, and Isabella until it's time to pick up Nalani and her boyfriend, Jung He, at O'Hare. You have your photoshoot today, right?"

"Yes. Bob is going to shoot pictures of Meghan and me, and probably some with Kjell, too. Bob's friend Mariana is going to help."

"Just remember the limits, please, Pumpkin."

"The government needs to mind its own business!" I growled. "They aren't actually protecting me! THEY are the ones abusing ME!"

"That is what your fellow citizens want," Dad said.

"My 'fellow citizens' are freaking morons!" I declared. "Every single time someone says 'think of the children' they make things *worse*, not better!"

"I don't disagree," Dad said. "That's the entire point of working under the radar with Philosophy Club and your Hangout."

"It worked in the 60s, but I don't think it will work now," I observed. "9/11 changed things and now everyone wants to be 'safe' no matter how little actual safety they receive in return for giving up their rights!"

"A daughter after my own heart!" Dad declared.

I snuggled close, loving how safe I felt in Dad's arms.

"I want to change my trip to New Hampshire to stop in New York City for one night so I can see Marcella," I said.

"That's fine," Dad replied. "Your moms, Suzanne, and I are taking a long weekend in New Hampshire in April. Katy had a cancelation and offered it to us."

Which made sense, given we were going to Saint Martin over Spring Break. I hoped Bob would be able to go, because if he couldn't, I wasn't sure who I could invite. I'd try Tomás, but his parents were very conservative.

"Breakfast is ready!" Yuriko announced from the door to the sunroom.

"Be there in three minutes!" I replied, tightening my arms around dad and snuggling as close as possible.

 Jesse

"What did you want to do today?" I asked Luna when she arrived at my house just after breakfast.

"I thought that was obvious!" she replied with an inviting smile.

"Is that all I'm good for?" I asked with a goofy smile.

"You're a great goalie, too!" Luna replied.

I laughed, took her hand, and led her up to my room. Two hours later, sweaty and sated, Luna was stretched out on top of me, her chin resting on her arms, which were crossed on my chest.

"When does hockey practice resume?"

"The 2nd," I replied. "And our first game is against Chicago Latin on the 11th. We play Saint Patrick on the 18th, and Lane Tech on the 25th. We play for the city championship on February 1st, assuming we win our group. You start your indoor practices in February, right?"

"Yes. I don't think I told you that I'm going to room with CeCe in the Fall."

"You didn't," I replied. "That's cool."

"You guys are kind of on the outs, right?"

"Once she decided to go to school in Arizona, it was tough to maintain our relationship. I'm not upset with her or anything, but I know she was disappointed that things kind of came to an end."

"She's not upset with you, and she's been dating. And that means I don't have to worry about coming between you."

"Now there's a picture!" I chuckled.

Luna laughed, "A fantasy of yours?"

"Been there, done that!" I smirked. "But the participants' names cannot be revealed to protect the guilty!"

"Simone talked to me about a special Valentine's Day party."

"She mentioned it to me, too, but we'd have to be VERY careful about who was invited. You'll be eighteen by then, and to be totally safe, nobody under seventeen could be invited if it's going to be like what Simone hinted. And even then, I'm not sure my dad would be OK with it, because parents would lose their minds."

"Simone is only a Sophomore, so she wouldn't even be able to come to the party she wants you to host. She turns sixteen in March."

"The only way it could work is either nobody under seventeen or nobody older than seventeen," I said. "Anything else opens my dad, moms, and aunts to all kinds of potential trouble. I honestly don't care what the government thinks, and age doesn't matter if it's just one-on-one, but once you have a group, there are too many variables."

"Even if everyone promised not to say anything?"

"I'm not sure how you could ever be certain," I said. "Again, one-on-one is different."

"Forget the law for the moment, would you do it?"

"Sure," I replied. "I mean, so long as we set clear boundaries and everyone agrees in advance."

"I know absolutely for sure neither Simone nor I would say anything, and I'm positive Destinee, Shelly, and Elena would agree to keep it totally secret. I bet Pete, Jack, Freddy, and Tom would be cool about it, too."

"Just out of curiosity, did Simone expect it to go beyond naked *Twister* and dancing?"

"I don't think she intended an orgy!" Luna declared. "But with ten people naked together, who knows?!"

"An orgy would cross a line I don't think I'm prepared to cross," I said. "And even if I was, my dad isn't going to agree. If we were all over eighteen and had our own place, he wouldn't care. But society has its head so far up its butt about sex in general, and teen sex specifically, that the risk of doing something like that in his house is just too great."

"Changing subjects back to college, are you applying anywhere except UW Madison?"

"Minnesota and BC," I replied. "But I'm positive I'll get into UW."

"Are you being scouted?"

"Coach said scouts will be at the tournament, so I'm sure someone will talk to me at some point. That said, I'm pretty sure I prefer to play club hockey rather than Div I. I want to focus on school and do what I need to do to find a coaching, scouting, or management job with a pro team. What's your major going to be?"

"Computers. Yours will be business, right?"

"Yes, with a minor in computers."

"What if you can't find a job with a hockey team?"

"There are plenty of sports options, including baseball, plus, of course, entry level management jobs in non-sports companies. I have plenty of time to work it out! How about you? Silicon Valley?"

"I'd love that! Obviously, Redmond, Washington is another option."

"Microsoft? Really?"

Luna laughed, "I'm not a Mac fanatic like everyone in your family! Once more before we shower and have lunch? Then a sauna?"

"Works for me!" I agreed.

 Steve

"What are your plans after graduation?" I asked Audrey as she, Brad, Isabella, and I drank hot cocoa in the sunroom.

"Hang onto your hat," Audrey declared. "Brad and I are both going to seek commissions in the Navy."

"I didn't see THAT coming!" I exclaimed in surprise. "What brought that on?"

"Opportunities, really. Neither of us really like the job prospects, and after speaking with an officer recruiter, we decided we'll go for it. We haven't signed yet, but we'll do that once we get back to Columbus."

"The Navy has been pretty good to many of my friends," I said. "Not to mention my dad. And Albert is going to try for an appointment to the Naval Academy. What about you, Isabella?"

"Grad school for a Master's in International Relations."

"You should absolutely speak to my friend Mary, who'll be here tomorrow. She works for the State Department. She's Chief of the Russian Desk. I'll introduce you."

"Thanks!"

"Did you guys have anything specific you wanted to do today?" I asked.

"A sauna, for sure," Audrey said. "Otherwise, just hang out. Well, and Isabella hopes you'll fuck her brains out!"

"AUDREY!" Isabella screeched.

"It's true, isn't it?" Audrey teased.

"That's outrageous, even for you, Audrey!" Brad declared.

I chuckled, "She was almost as outrageous at her sister's wedding, so it doesn't surprise me."

I also had taken note that Isabella was a beautiful Hispanic Steve type, but hadn't given any thought to her beyond that, and neither she nor Audrey had hinted at anything before the comment Audrey had made.

"Audrey! I'm going to KILL you!" Isabella declared.

"Oh, please!" Audrey protested. "You purposefully had an STD test before I came to Chicago, and you have the test paper in your pocket!"

"Argh!" Isabella growled.

"Dial it back a bit, please, Audrey," I requested.

"Thank you!" Isabella exclaimed.

"Audrey," I said, "I do have to ask -- did you tell Brad and Isabella how we usually use the sauna here?"

"It must have slipped my mind!" Audrey replied with a smirk.

"Uh huh," I chuckled.

"What are we missing?" Brad asked.

"The norm for the sauna here is fully naked," I replied. "No bathing suits or towels. But if anyone is uncomfortable with that, we can use towels."

"Adults, right?" Isabella asked.

"Our family has very Scandinavian values in that regard, so kids, too. Both with the family, and some of them with their friends."

"This place becomes crazier by the second!" Isabella declared.

"My late dear friend Jorge didn't call it *Cirque du Steve* for nothing! Or, as someone else called it, the Madhouse on Woodlawn."

"Late friend?" Brad asked.

"He was killed by a drunk driver just over nine years ago. My wife, the medical doctor, was in the car as well; she survived, obviously."

"Man, that sucks. Did the drunk survive?"

"Not this time, but that is a fairly common thing, unfortunately."

We finished our hot cocoa and then headed to the basement. I was curious to see what would happen, and it totally didn't surprise me when Isabella and Brad both requested we use towels. Ten minutes later, the sauna was heated, and I ladled water onto the rocks. As the steam began rising, Yuriko and Natalie appeared at the door wearing robes. Without a word, they closed the door, and came in about a minute later with towels wrapped around them.

"How were things at home?" I asked Natalie.

"Pretty good, though Nicole told my parents she and Mikey are going to get an apartment together in Madison, rather than live in the dorms; well assuming they both get in there. You can imagine how that went over with my dad."

"I can. Your mom was OK with it, right?"

"Yes. She's known about Mikey and Nicole since it started; Dad just now figured it out, and he's not happy."

"How old is she?" Audrey asked.

"Sixteen, the same as Mikey and Jesse. They all played hockey together before High School."

"Mind if I ask how old you are?"

"I don't mind at all," Natalie said. "I'm twenty."

"You're the one who's going to Russia for grad school, right?" Audrey asked.

"I'm obviously not the one going home to Japan when I finish my degree!" she smirked.

"Yuriko, what year are you?" Audrey asked.

"Sophomore, but I'm twenty-two. I studied with my grandfather for two years before coming to the US, and I'll return to Japan after I complete my Master's degree in horticulture."

"How did the two of you meet Steve?"

"I met him in Japan when he visited the karate dojo where my best friend is the wife of the master, though then she was fifteen, and not yet engaged. Of course, I was a silly school girl at that point, and didn't see Steve again until I came to Chicago to study."

"And I met him in Russia when I was fifteen," Natalie said. "The team Mikey, Jesse, and my sister played for was invited to play teams in Russia, and I went along. I fell in love with Russia, and decided to get a degree in Russian history with a minor in foreign relations then work on a Master's and PhD in Russian history at «Европейский университет в Санкт-Петербурге» -- the European University at Saint Petersburg."

"You both live here full time?" Isabella asked.

"We're the live-in girlfriends," Natalie said with a sly smile. "Yuriko goes back to Japan each summer, and this summer I'm going to Russia for two months, but otherwise, yes, we live here."

"Girlfriends?" Isabella asked skeptically. "Steve said 'housemates' when he gave the tour!"

"Steve is circumspect with newcomers," Natalie replied. "But nobody hides that fact, right, Yuriko?"

"Right!" Yuriko confirmed happily. "We both love him, and he loves us, but he cannot provide the two things we both need, or a third thing which I need. For both, it is to be a husband and father children; for me, it is someone who will live in Japan."

"Three wives, kids by four women, and two girlfriends?" Isabella asked.

"And the freedom to fool around!" Audrey declared.

"Any tips?" Brad asked with a smirk, earning himself a faux glare of annoyance from Audrey.

"Don't piss off the girlfriend," I said. "You'll live longer!"

All the girls laughed.

"The logistics must be 'interesting'," Brad observed.

Natalie smirked, "We all know how to share! We learned that in kindergarten!"

"Can I ask why?" Isabella inquired.

"Because he provides what we need at this point in our lives," Yuriko said. "Love, compassion, friendship, intimacy, and companionship."

"But don't mistake intimacy for sex," Natalie quickly added. "They're two very different things."

"How so?" Isabella asked,

Natalie smiled, "That's something we've discussed at length in Philosophy Club, but the short answer is true intimacy is the joining of souls, not bodies. When Yuriko and I each marry, we'll continue to be very intimate friends with Steve, though sexual intimacy will end. But that's really a pale, limited version of intimacy compared to the merging of «kami» -- the animating life force, or spirit, or soul, if you will, though not precisely.

"In most cases, though not all, what we call a 'mindfuck' precedes a physical fuck. That is, a long, detailed conversation designed to break down preconceived notions, open the mind, and forge a truly intimate relationship. Or, as someone said, opening the mind before opening the thighs. And that second thing doesn't always happen. Steve has several very intimate female friends with whom he has never had sex."

"This is all just out in the open?" Brad asked.

"More or less," I replied. "As Natalie said, we're a bit circumspect with newcomers, but we don't hide it. The ultimate goal is subversive -- to develop a group of people who reject social convention, believe in freedom and liberty, and who reject Puritanism in all its forms, whether religious or secular, left or right. The same is true for authoritarianism. Fundamentally, people should be free to do as they please unless they harm another person or violate their rights."

"A perfect example is my marriage. There is literally no harm done to anyone by Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, and me believing we're married, or Jennifer and Josie being married. My kids are all intelligent, healthy, well-cared for, and mature. Having a very extended family has actually been positive. Granted, it's a different form from the typical Hispanic or Oriental extended family, but it provides all the same benefits.

"In addition, our kids are given near total freedom to determine the course of their lives, and have the autonomy to make their own decisions. All of them have run their own lives since they were toddlers, and very successfully, because we've taught that with freedom comes responsibility. Do they make mistakes? Absolutely! But then again, so do I. That's one of the most important ways to learn.

"Anyone who thinks that my theory of child-rearing is harmful has to deal with the fact that Jesse is a star athlete and at the top of his class; Birgit holds a black belt in Shōtōkan and is also at the top of her class. Matthew is an excellent actor and singer, and is on the debate team, and is a very good student; Michael is on the robotics team and is also an excellent student. Albert is a pilot at age thirteen, though he can't get his license until he's seventeen; he's also planning on going to the Naval Academy, as I said earlier. Stephie and Ashley are both excellent students and both are brown belts in Shōtōkan. In other words, it works."

"My parents were pretty controlling," Isabella said.

"Have you heard anything here with which you disagree?" Natalie asked.

"Not really, though it's pretty strange and 'out there'."

"You should come to the impromptu Philosophy Club meeting tomorrow. You'll see what this is all about."

The door opened and Jesse stuck his head in.

"How much longer will you be?" he asked.

"We're basically done," I said, standing up.

The others stood up and followed me out.

 Jesse

"What was with the towels?" Luna asked after I put the 'Privacy Please' sign on the door to the sauna.

"I'm going to guess Audrey's boyfriend or friend wasn't comfortable being naked. There are some family friends like that, and my Aunt Stephanie's husband was squeamish about it when he first started coming here while they were dating. If you think about it, it's a pretty big thing for most people given social views on nudity and sex."

"Speaking of sex..." Luna smirked.

"Is that all I'm good for?" I asked with a grin as she moved onto my lap.

"No, of course not! I said so before! But we have limited opportunities, so I have to make the most of the ones we do have! We do lots of stuff together that isn't sex!"

I chuckled as I moved my hand to cup her firm boob, "I know that. I was teasing!"

When we finished fooling around, I filled the whirlpool, and we got in, with Luna sitting between my legs and reclining back against me.

"Some of the girls from the softball team want to come to your Hangouts. Would that be OK?"

"Yes, though it's important to understand that we talk about pretty much any topic you can imagine, often in depth, and sometimes the conversations are R-rated, and occasionally even beyond that. And not just sex -- drugs, abortion, racism, discrimination, and a host of other controversial topics. Basically, if you can't deal with a George Carlin skit, you shouldn't be there. And if your parents would pitch a fit, you have to be careful what you say to them."

"I've never listened to George Carlin," Luna replied.

"You absolutely should. His philosophy is very much in vogue in our group, along with Frank Zappa, not to mention ancient Greek philosophers and Enlightenment thinkers. We also talk about religion, including Eastern religions."

"You know, if we invited Simone, Destinee, Shelly, Elena, Pete, Jack, Freddy, and Tom to your Hangout, you could get a good feel for if they'd blab about the party."

"That's a good idea," I observed, though I hadn't figured out where we'd meet because Libby was going to go to my dad's Philosophy Club meetings.

"You know what else is a good idea?" Luna asked, shifting and turning so she could straddle me.

 Steve

"There's a shower in the bathroom there to rinse off," I said. "It's really only big enough for one, so you'll need to take turns. Isabella, you can come upstairs with me or wait, whichever you prefer. Yuriko and Natalie will use their shower."

"Uhm..." Isabella hemmed and hawed.

"Just a rinse in the shower," I said. "I wasn't implying anything more."

"There is no safer person on the planet than Steve," Natalie said. "He means it."

Isabella nodded tentatively, we grabbed our clothes, then she followed the three of us up the stairs. Rather than go to my room, I walked to the playroom, to avoid breaking any marital rules. I shut the door to the kitchen behind us, and walked straight to the bathroom, putting my clothes on the vanity, with Isabella following suit.

"You can go first if you want, and I'll wait in the other room, or I can go first, and you can either stay or wait in the other room."

"You'd really just drop your towel in front of me like it was nothing?" she asked.

"The answer is a nuanced 'yes' -- I would, but not if it made you uncomfortable. That's why I offered the options I did."

"And you'd expect reciprocity?"

"Expect? No. That's up to you. What Natalie said about being safe is absolutely true -- nothing happens that makes you uncomfortable or that you don't want to do."

"I was positive you would suggest showering together," Isabella said.

"I did think it, but given the totality of the circumstances, I felt it was inappropriate to say it, so I didn't."

"Most guys would at least try, especially after what Audrey said before!"

"First of all, I'm not most guys. Second, a desire to do a thing is neither a compulsion nor a promise to do it. Third, Audrey revealed something private which she should not have revealed, and it would be uncouth to act on it."

"Are you for real?" Isabella asked.

"I am. Unless you object, I'll go first. You can stay or not, it's your call, and staying does not mean you give me permission to stay when you shower. You have to tell me it's OK."

"This isn't an act to try to seduce me?"

"It's not an act. Whether it's seductive or not is irrelevant. I'm going to turn on the shower, wait ten seconds, then get in."

I did as I'd said, and it didn't surprise me when Isabella didn't leave the bathroom. Of course, it wouldn't have surprised me if she'd left, either, as I had no idea what she wanted to do, if anything. I quickly rinsed off under the tepid spray, which helped cool me down, then stepped out, grabbing a towel from the rack to dry myself.

I made a silent bet with myself that she wouldn't ask me to leave, and I won it when she dropped her towel, revealing a well-toned and sexy body. I didn't avert my eyes taking in both her neatly trimmed black pubic hair, her small, firm breasts, and her tight butt.

I finished drying myself and decided the best option was to wrap the towel around myself and wait to see what happened, as either standing naked or dressing sent messages I didn't feel were appropriate to send. Isabella got out of

the shower, grabbed a towel, and quickly dried herself. then stood facing me, the towel held in front of her, covering her from collarbones to knees.

"You want to, right?" she asked quietly.

"That's not the correct question," I replied. "The correct question is do *you* want to. If you do, then it's up to me to say 'yes' or 'no'. Your decision shouldn't be based on mine."

"Do you seriously expect me to believe that if I drop the towel and say I want to do what Audrey suggested, you might say 'no'?"

"Whether you believe it or not, that is absolutely possible."

"This is what Natalie was referring to, isn't it?"

"Confounding expectations is part of what we call the 'mindfuck'. The entire point is to get you off balance and force you to think things through, not simply do what's expected or what social convention says you should do. And the situation is complex, and I would need to be sure you thought through the ramifications."

"Which ones?"

'Having sex with a married man who is nearly forty, for starters. In the moment it might seem to be a good idea, but will you regret it tomorrow? Or next week? Or next year?"

"How can I know what I'll think a year from now?"

"You can't. The question comes down to whether you're prepared to deal with the regret if it arises. If not, don't do it. Another consideration is how you feel

about me telling my wives about the encounter, because the price of freedom, as it were, is full disclosure. And there's one more consideration. Have you seen *Risky Business*?"

"Duh! It's classic Chicago like *The Blues Brothers* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*! Why?"

"Miles, despite mostly being full of shit, teaches Joel an important principle in *Risky Business*. Do you remember it?"

"It's not 'Princeton can use a man like Joel' because that's the Admissions guy."

"The principle is this -- *If you can't say it, you can't do it.*"

"You mean what Audrey said?"

"As an example, but it could also be understood as making an affirmative statement or making a clear request. Words have power that thoughts can never, ever have. The myth around summoning demons is apropos -- saying their secret name gives you power over them. In the same way, saying something out loud gives it power and manifests it."

"Are you *trying* to confuse me?"

"That's part of the point of the 'mindfuck' -- to force you to think about things you've never thought about and never realized, and to think in ways you've never thought before. Let me put it this way; which is more powerful - thinking you love someone or telling them?"

"Telling them."

"Even if they know you think it?"

Isabella smiled, "Got it! Vocalizing something makes it real in a way that thinking it could never do. What about writing?"

"Also powerful, but spoken words are even more powerful. Reading a speech by a great orator is not the same as hearing it. A great orator can move people in ways the written word never, ever can. That said, the written word has its own power, which we acknowledge with the aphorism 'the pen is mightier than the sword'. That's true, but spoken words put both to shame."

"That makes sense."

"We have conversations like this at our Philosophy Club meetings. Imagine a room full of people doing this."

"Naked?" Isabella smirked.

"We've actually done that. It was early on, and was done to prove to everyone that nudity and sex do not HAVE to go together."

Of course, in that case, it had led to Elizabeth offering to help Ben with his raging erection which, in the fullness of time, had led to them having a baby together.

"Don't guys get hard?"

"Initially, yes, but had we used the sauna naked, I wouldn't have. Brad might have, but once you're used to it, it doesn't happen because you've broken the social conditioning that being naked means you are about to have sex. We could be having this conversation naked, get dressed, and go about our business. That's normal; what society says is 'normal' is actually not. That's even acknowledged in the book of Genesis when Adam and Eve were naked and weren't self-conscious until after they broke the rule God had set for the tree."

"Hang on! You believe that?"

"It depends on what you mean. There are spiritual and philosophical truths taught in Genesis which are true irrespective of whether or not God created the world in six days, formed both Adam and Eve from the dust of the ground or formed her from his side, and a talking serpent who is not identified as Satan. So yes, I believe the truths taught there, even if I don't believe it's true."

"Mind. Blown. Not just by that, but how easily and fluidly you answer and ask questions."

"Our Philosophy Club has met regularly for most of the past twenty years, though we called it a 'rap session' initially."

"You know Audrey is going to think we're doing it, right?" Isabella asked.

"Who cares what Audrey thinks?! She shouldn't have violated your confidence in that way, and I'll discuss it with her. In fact, I'll make that the topic for tomorrow's impromptu session. I won't use names, but she'll know it's her. And, if it's something you do want to do, it doesn't have to be today. You can wait until Audrey goes home and we can get together sometime in January. You're also welcome to come to Philosophy Club. I'll make sure you know the days. You can also decide you don't want to do it and still come to Philosophy Club. The two have nothing to do with each other."

"You are the strangest guy I've ever met! And I mean that in a positive way."

"You aren't the first one to notice that. The ball is in your court now. We can dress and rejoin the others, or you can drop the towel and ask me for what you want."

Isabella was silent for a few seconds, then let her towel fall away.

VII. Ain't That The Truth!

December 30, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

Bob, Meghan, Mariana, and Cassie arrived just after lunch, and together with Kjell, we went to the great room to discuss the photo shoot. I asked him for a quick private conversation and he agreed.

"What did your parents say about Saint Martin?" I asked.

"They agreed in principle that I could go, but my dad wants to talk to your dad to make sure adults will be there."

"Cool! All the girls can go, too! It's going to be fun!"

We went back to where the others were waiting in the great room.

"I want to shoot what look like candid shots," he said. "Will we be able to shoot in the sauna, too?"

"I think so," I replied. "I just saw Dad, Yuriko, and Natalie come from downstairs with an out-of-town guest. Jesse is in there with Luna, but they won't stay for more than thirty minutes. Will your camera be OK in the heat and humidity?"

"I don't think it needs to be turned on for the photos. It's not as if you can see heat."

"No, but you could see steam," I said. "I think when they did the photos after the sauna was built, they used a spray bottle to make it look like Dad and a girl were sweating."

"That's a good idea!" Bob declared. "And we can use the pool table?"

"Yes. Dad said the entire house was OK, except for anyone else's bedroom."

"Cool. Let's start with the sunroom."

"Sure."

Kjell, Bob, and Mariana carried the cases Bob had brought with him, and we began setting up in the sunroom.

 Steve

As soon as Isabella's towel landed on the floor in front of her, I loosened the towel around my waist and let it fall away as well.

"Does that mean you want to?" Isabella asked.

"Want to what?" I inquired with a smile.

Isabella rolled her eyes, "I have to say it?"

"As I said, if you can't say it, you can't do it."

"I want you to fuck my brains out. Will you?"

"Yes, assuming you show me your STD test paper. It's not a condition, but I'd like you to come to Philosophy Club."

"The paper is in the back pocket of my jeans," she said, pointing to the pile of her clothes.

I picked up her jeans, slipped the paper from the back pocket, unfolded it and saw it was clean, though something else caught my eye -- next to 'Date of Most Recent Sexual Contact' was the word 'None', and next to 'Number of intimate partners' was a '0'. I was curious if she'd say anything, but if she didn't, I wouldn't.

In the past, I'd have paused and probably talked Isabella to death to confirm she really wanted to give her virginity to a married man in what was, in all probability, a one-off encounter. But that was the old me, and the new me was determined to make Isabella's first time fantastic.

I held out my arms and without any hesitation, Isabella took three steps from where she'd be standing, moving so her small, hard nipples just barely touched my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and she turned her face up for a kiss. As our lips touched, Isabella melted against me and I tightened my arms, holding her tight. Isabella parted her lips and wrapped her arms around as our tongues began to dance.

I quickly rose to the occasion and Isabella shifted her hips a bit, allowing me to rise between us. She put her hands on my butt, pulled me tightly against her, and began flexing her legs, moving up and down, her soft, black pubic hair tickling my shaft. We kissed for another minute, then I released Isabella from my arms, took her hand, and led her to the bedroom.

I pulled down the comforter on the bed, and helped Isabella get in, and I saw a look of surprise on her face. Ever since we'd turned it into what my wives called 'the playroom', we only put up the cloth that covered the mirror on the ceiling when it was being used as a guest room.

"A mirror?" she asked breathlessly.

"So you can watch!" I said with a big smile.

I climbed into bed with Isabella, moved on top of her, and we began kissing. She spread her legs wide and pushed her hips up, encouraging me. I very much wanted to taste her, but I could feel she was plenty wet, so I chose to wait for my taste until after I'd fulfilled her request. I reached down, grasped my shaft, and rubbed my glans against her plump, slick labia.

When my glans was coated with her juices, I positioned myself, then pushed my hips forward. Isabella's labia parted before me, and I slowly slid about two inches into her silky, slick tunnel. I paused for a few seconds, pulled back slightly, then buried myself in Isabella's tight pussy.

"«¡Dios mío!»" she gasped after breaking our kiss.

I waited for about twenty seconds, and when I felt Isabella raise her hips, I began moving, starting with slow, gentle thrusts. We began kissing again, I felt her heels on my calves, and she matched the movement of her hips to my strokes. After a few minutes, I felt Isabella's heels move further up my legs, and her movements became more energetic.

I took the hint and began stroking faster, and after a few more minutes, I felt her heels on my upper thighs, and she began humping frantically. I broke our kiss, put my head next to hers, and began fucking her hard and fast. Isabella gasped, moaned, and eventually groaned as her pussy spasmed around my dick and she had her first orgasm of the afternoon.

"Fuck me, Steve!" she begged. "«¡Dios mío!» Fuck me!"

We continued our energetic screw, with Isabella having two more orgasms before I pushed deep into her and came hard in her spasming pussy. As soon as the last jet of cum left my dick, I withdrew, slid down, and latched onto Isabella's clit, lashing it with my tongue and sucking until she had a fourth orgasm.

When Isabella's orgasm had passed, I pressed my tongue deeply into her sodden pussy, coating it with our combined juices, then moved up and French kissed her. She recoiled at first, but then got into the kiss, which we held for nearly two minutes. I broke the kiss and moved off her, lying on my back next to her, looking at our bodies in the mirror.

For a few minutes, the only sound in the room was our heavy breathing, which slowly returned to normal.

"We have time to do it twice more before I have to leave for the airport," I said. "If you want to, that is."

"Are you kidding?!" Isabella exclaimed. "Yes!"

Our second round was in my new favorite position -- 'adulthood', with me sitting cross-legged and Isabella in my lap. Once again, after I'd come, I licked her to another orgasm, and we shared a French kiss. The third round was like the first, though I added a twist just as I entered her.

"I want to cum in your mouth," I said, then kissed her before she could respond.

I kept kissing her until she had her first orgasm and our breathing was too hard to sustain kissing. After her third orgasm that round, I repeated my desire, and when Isabella didn't protest or object, I pulled out, moved up, and offered her my glans. She opened her mouth and began sucking softly as I gently thrust in and out of her sexy mouth.

When I came, she coughed and choked, but didn't push me off, and I felt her swallow. After the final spurt of cum, I pulled out of her mouth, moved between her legs, pushed into her, and French kissed her as I began fucking her. I brought her off, then slid down, and licked her to a final orgasm.

We lay together for about ten minutes before I led her back to the bathroom so we could shower together.

"Did I fulfill your request?" I asked as I began washing her.

"Oh, yeah," she sighed dreamily.

"I'm glad. I very much enjoyed being with you! I hope you'll start coming to Philosophy Club."

"I think I will," she said. "Do you think we could do this again sometime?"

"I certainly wouldn't mind another time!" I declared.

I finished washing Isabella, and after she washed me, we both rinsed ourselves, dried off, and then dressed. I asked her to help me change the sheets, which she did, and we left the playroom.

"Have fun, *Steve Perry*?" Ashley asked with a smirk as we passed her in the kitchen.

"I'll deal with you later, you little scamp!" I declared.

She laughed, and I shook my head.

"Why mention the lead singer in Journey?" Isabella asked as we made our way towards the sunroom.

"Wrong Steve Perry," I chuckled. "She's referring to the lead singer and founder of Cherry Poppin' Daddies."

"Wait!" Isabella exclaimed, stopping just before we reached the sunroom. "How could she know? And you knew?"

I led Isabella to my study so we could speak privately.

"How I knew was easy," I said. "On your STD test form, next to 'Most Recent Sexual Encounter' was 'None', implying you hadn't had sex before. That was confirmed by the '0' next to number of intimate partners."

Isabella laughed, "And here I thought you wouldn't know! I mean, you can't tell, right?"

"The usual signs are actually being nervous or tentative, but the mechanics are both obvious and easy, so no, there's no way to tell. The Old Wives Tale about blood and pain is exactly that, at least after about age fifteen or sixteen, for any girl who is even moderately active, and most girls, even if they aren't. If I hadn't seen the test paper, I wouldn't have known, and, honestly, it's not any of my business if you didn't want to tell me. I am curious, though, if you don't mind answering, as to why you didn't say anything."

"I was concerned you might say 'no'."

"Anecdotal evidence suggests most guys are thrilled to have a virgin."

"I kind of figured with your experience you would want a girl who had experience and knew what she was doing."

"I actually have a serious fetish for virgins, but it's not a determining factor either way. The advantage of you not saying anything was that I didn't need to ask if you were absolutely sure, and have a conversation about it."

"But you did know!"

"Yes, but only due to an oversight on your part about the test form, and if you weren't going to make a point of it, it wasn't my place to do so."

"What about your daughter?"

I chuckled, "She obviously has no way to know, but she's a scamp, as I said, and she was teasing me in a way that would make me laugh and not get her in any real trouble."

"But she knew we were in bed together?"

"As Natalie and Yuriko made clear, we don't hide things in this house," I replied. "Our kids received age-appropriate information about sex starting when they were toddlers, and were taught to have open minds and to mind their own business, though teasing is allowed, so long as it's meant in a good-natured way."

"But knowing you had sex with me?"

I shrugged, "I know they have sex; well, not Ashley because she's too young, but my three eldest have overnight guests with my blessing. Heck, my second oldest is basically engaged, and has been since he was five."

"What?!" Isabella gasped.

I chuckled, "Remember your comment about things being strange? You don't know the half of it! Come to Philosophy Club and you'll have your mind blown even more."

"Before you leave, can I ask something?"

"Of course."

"What is it with guys and blowjobs?"

"The feel good, and oral sex is a very intimate act. Some people actually consider fellatio to be *more* intimate than intercourse, and if you think about it, they have a point. It's one thing to engage in procreative activities; it's a very different thing to use your mouth on a penis or in a vagina to give pleasure."

"Do you always use technical terms?"

"No. I could rephrase that in vulgar terms, but I don't think it would have the same effect because I was trying to make a point about the meaning of the act, not the act itself. Fundamentally, it comes down to a mutual agreement to do a thing, and that can be one of mutual desire or one of compromise. My advice is to find someone with whom you won't need to make compromises with regard to sexual activity. Not being on the same page with regard to frequency and choice of activities is a recipe for trouble."

"One more question if you have time?"

I checked my watch and nodded, "A few minutes."

"Do you have complete freedom and do your wives and girlfriends have it, too?"

"Not complete," I replied. "There are rules, but so long as they're followed, we are free to manage our sex lives as we feel best. We don't have a lot of time to go into it, but the rules include things like overnight stays requiring advance permission, and all encounters have to be reported in a timely fashion. STD tests are mandatory, and birth control is required. Those two rules apply to the kids, too."

"Uhm, you didn't ask about birth control," Isabella observed.

"I had a vasectomy," I replied. "YOU didn't ask, either."

"That was one of the things Audrey told me. I asked her what she'd do if she accidentally got pregnant by you and she said it was virtually impossible."

"It's literally impossible. My sperm count is zero. I have that checked every two years during my regular physical."

"You're right about it becoming stranger by the minute!"

"I do need to head the to the airport."

We went to the sunroom, where Audrey and Brad were sitting with Birgit, Suzanne, and Ashley.

"Cinderella, may I have a word?" I requested.

She and Birgit exchanged a look which spoke volumes, and Ashley came out of the sunroom.

"Was I right?" she asked impishly.

"Right or not, it's OK to tease me when it's just me, but not in front of a girl you don't even know."

"You're right, of course," Ashley said with a smirk. "But it was funny, right?"

"Listen, you little scamp..."

Ashley laughed softly, "I love you, Dad. I'll be careful in the future."

"That's what truly scares me!" I replied.

 Jesse

"I need to go to the store to pick up some things for tomorrow night," I said to Luna as we walked back to the coach house after our sauna.

"I'd offer to go with you, but I need to be home to help make dinner, and the last thing I want to do is give my parents any reason to suspect what we were doing today!"

I chuckled, "I believe they know, given they found your birth control pills! They know it's too late to preserve your virginity, and even if they don't like it, they really don't have a choice but to accept that it happened. I was actually surprised that Jazlyn was allowed to come to the party."

"Your dad worked wonders with my dad and Paige's dad! They come to your dad's Guys' Night and our moms come to Girls' Night Out! Jazlyn's dad mellowed a bit, though I don't think she told him she was coming to the party."

"Ugh," I groaned. "That's the *last* thing we need. I probably should have asked, because I'm pretty sure he banned her from setting foot on our property."

"My dad said your dad didn't care about that."

"Oh, he does, but what he won't do is enforce their rules. He did make a rule then about nobody under eighteen, but he relented because nothing happened and I promised nothing would happen, and it didn't. That's why we need to be careful with the Valentine's Day party."

"I know. I'll talk to them and invite them to your Hangout next week."

"OK. Do you want a ride home?"

"Sure!"

I went into the house to get my wallet. I'd grabbed the keys to Aunt Jessica's BMW before Luna and I had left the main house, so we got into the car with MD plates and the ER sticker, and headed to Luna's house. After I dropped her off, I drove to Jewel to get the things we needed for the New Year's Eve party.

 Birgit

"Let's go to Giordano's for pizza," I suggested when Bob finally finished shooting just before 5:00pm."

"I need to call my mom and ask," Mariana said.

"You can use the phone in the kitchen," I said. "Come with me."

She followed me to the kitchen, and I waited while she called home to get permission.

"All set!" she exclaimed happily.

"Cool!" I replied. "Let's go!"

"Hang on a sec, Birgit. Can I ask you something?"

"About?"

"Are you and Kjell serious?" she asked.

"Very!" I exclaimed. "But we're not a couple. Why?"

"He's cute, but I don't want to interfere or mess things up."

"He's not my boyfriend, but he is sleeping in my bed with me," I said, then smirked, "I'm willing to share! If you're interested, I'm sure he'd be OK with you joining us!"

"I, er, uhm, wasn't asking for that!" Mariana exclaimed.

Actually, I was absolutely sure she *was*, but Bob had said she was completely and totally straight, and my offer of a threesome had made her uncomfortable.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," I said.

"It's OK. I was just surprised that you so casually offered a threesome. Do you like girls, too, like Meghan?"

"I think the best way to put it is that I strongly prefer guys, but I'll do stuff with girls in a threesome. I've been with girls one-on-one, but it was just experimenting."

"So you've, like, gone down on a girl?"

"Yes. And I'm OK with doing that in a threesome, as I said, but not one-on-one, though I have in the past. But it's also possible to have threesomes where the

girls don't do anything with each other, and just make the guy feel good together. I am sorry if I surprised you that way."

"It's OK," Mariana declared. "Let's go have pizza!"

We went back to the others, and after everyone put on their hats, coats, and gloves, the six of us left the house to walk to Giordano's.

 Steve

"Steve Adams, please meet Jun Hie Zēng," Nalani said when she and her boyfriend came through the security doors at O'Hare. "Jun Hie, Steve Adams."

He and I shook hands, and Nalani and I exchanged a chaste hug.

"Do you have checked bags?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "One each."

I led them to the baggage claim and, as was the norm, we had to wait.

"There will be around twenty-five people at the impromptu Philosophy Club meeting tomorrow," I said.

"Great! How many people usually come to your New Year's Eve parties?"

"Around a hundred and thirty, roughly, including kids, though they have their own party at a friend's house next door."

"Unsupervised?" Jun Hie asked.

"We check on them once an hour, but my kids and their friends are very, very responsible. We've never once had a problem."

"Nalani said you're very liberal in your views."

"On some things," I replied. "Fundamentally, I believe everyone should be left alone, and allowed to do as they please, so long as they don't harm someone else or violate their rights. I've been described as a classical liberal small government constitutionalist, which pretty much puts me in the Jeffersonian camp versus the Hamiltonian camp. In any event, you won't see police or fire response to my house or my neighbor's house! May I ask what you do for a living?"

"I'm a captain in the Honolulu PD. I served six years as a Marine MP, then applied for the police force."

"You should speak with my friend Pete Carston, who's a Deputy US Marshal. He'll be at the party tomorrow night; he used to be with NIS. You might also enjoy speaking with my friend Yekatarina Sergeyevna Anisimova, former Colonel in the KGB, as well as retired Colonel General Dmitry Sergeyevich Grigoryev of the Red Army and Russian Army."

"There has to be a story there!" he said.

"Oh, there is!"

While we were waiting for the bags, I explained how I'd met my Russian friends, though in a very shortened version. I did include all my encounters with the FBI, which had drawn shakes of the head from Jun Hie and smiles from Nalani, who had known part of the story. Their bags arrived just after I finished the story, and with them in hand, we headed to my car for the drive to Kenwood.

"OK, I'm in the wrong line of work!" Jun Hie declared when we walked into the house.

"I think you'll find that several members of my family would trade this for a house on the beach in Hawai'i!"

"Not on a police captain's salary! But the weather is very nice."

"Let me introduce you to everyone, then I'll show you to one of the guest rooms."

We found most of the family in the sunroom or Indian room, though Birgit was out with her friends. After introductions, I led the two of them to the basement and showed them the righthand guest room.

"Nowhere in the house is off limits except private bedrooms," I said. "Make yourselves at home and come join us upstairs once you're unpacked."

I left them and went upstairs and into the Indian room where my wives were sitting together.

"Your daughter is a real troublemaker!" I said to my wives.

"Which one?" Kara smirked. "Being a troublemaker doesn't narrow it down!"

"In this case, Ashley. I was entertaining, and she saw us come out of the playroom and said 'Have fun, *Steve Perry*?'"

"What does the lead singer of Journey have to do with a dalliance?" Jessica asked.

I chuckled, "My dalliance asked the same thing! Not that Steve Perry!"

Suzanne laughed, and I simply smiled and waited for her to say it.

"That's the name of the lead singer of Cherry Poppin' Daddies," Suzanne declared.

Kara and Jessica both laughed.

"Who were you entertaining, Tiger?"

"Audrey's friend, Isabella. And she was."

"You're unbelievable!" Jessica declared mirthfully. "How did THAT happen?"

"The usual way. Audrey talked up my prowess and Isabella decided it was what she wanted. There was a modest mindfuck beforehand, but I didn't know she was a virgin until basically the last minute, and she didn't tell me."

"She bled?" Kara asked.

"No, that would have been during the act, not at the last minute!" I chuckled. "She showed me her STI test paper and next to 'Most Recent Sexual Encounter' it said 'None' and 'Number of Intimate Partners' was '0'. I didn't say anything because she didn't. And yes, she was fun, Ashley had no clue, and was teasing, but I did speak to her afterwards."

"She's dangerous"! Suzanne declared.

"TELL me about it!" I chuckled. "When she said she'd be more careful in the future, I replied that was what truly scared me!"

"And we all thought it was Birgit who was the frightening one!" Kara declared.

"It's the quiet ones you have to watch out for!" I replied as the doorbell rang.

"That'll be the Italian food," Suzanne said.

"Then let's go eat!" I declared.

"You can eat me later!" Kara said sexily.

"Oh, me, too!" Suzanne added.

"Me three!" Jessica agreed.

That was a three-course meal I always enjoyed!



December 31, 2002, New Year's Eve, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"We have a few new faces here today," I said when people gathered for the special Philosophy Club meeting. "Everyone, please introduce yourselves. We'll go around the room, starting on my right with Elizabeth."

Once that was completed, I kicked off the topic I'd mentioned to Isabella.

"I'd like to discuss keeping confidences," I said, "and when it is, or isn't appropriate to reveal them. Anyone want to start with when it might be appropriate?"

"In my case," Trish said, "if a client were to reveal they intended to commit a crime. Attorney-client privilege no longer applies. Similarly, for mandatory reporters, they are required to reveal information about child abuse, even if told in confidence."

"We have serious ethical rules about revealing patient confidences," Jessica said, "though we are required to report STIs, along with the other mandatory reporting."

"I think this is where Jorge would have pointed out that we should consider who benefits from the revelation, in addition to other factors," Gaby said. "In other words, are you doing it to hurt someone, make yourself look good, or otherwise being a jerk."

"So, it's OK to reveal them otherwise?" Nicole asked.

"No, it's only part of the consideration, as I said. It's kind of like the 'little white lie' conversation we had around a dozen years ago."

"You've been meeting that long?" Jun Hie asked.

"Longer," Kathy Jaeger said. "These started with 'rap sessions' in Steve's and Elyse's apartment in '81 or '82. Kurt and I were part of that group, but then life intervened and we haven't attended very often. Our New Year's resolution is to spend more time here, the way we did before the kids were born."

And that was something that made me very happy. I'd felt we'd been losing touch, and was glad that Kathy had noticed as well. We saw them regularly because of Guys' Night and Girls' Night out, but I'd been feeling the close intimacy had been slipping away.

"How do you feel about police investigations?" Jun Hie asked. "Our goal is almost always to have people reveal confidences."

"So long as you do it ethically and within the bounds of the Constitution," Trish said.

"Spoken like an attorney," Henry teased.

"I AM an attorney!" she retorted.

"I'm going to argue that in most cases it's absolutely wrong," Jackson said. "If someone tells you something in confidence, you don't reveal it, no matter how much good might come from it. Honestly, if Steve told me something, his KGB friend wouldn't be able to get it from me!"

"Former KGB," I chuckled. "She was never FSB, either. And I agree with Jackson. Pretty much everyone here knows my situation, and one thing I do is ensure that I make it clear *before* I'm told something if I'm required to reveal it to my wives based on our agreements."

"I have to ask," Jun Hie said, "but 'wives'? Bigamy is illegal in every state and territory."

"Illinois conveniently has no statutes which prohibit claiming to be married when you are not, so long as no fraud is involved, nor any false statements made to officials. In other words, I can hold myself out as married and there is nothing the government can do to stop that, so long as I don't try to claim benefits or make false statements to the government. I'm legally married to Jessica, but the four of us hold ourselves out as married, just as my eldest son's two moms do."

"He's correct," Trish confirmed. "Illinois law does not prohibit what he's doing. Well, OK, technically, fornication and adultery are illegal, but those laws haven't been enforced for three decades."

"Seriously?" Audrey asked. "Illegal?"

"Fornication, if it's open and notorious, is a low-level misdemeanor; adultery, if it's open and notorious, is a Class A misdemeanor -- that's just below felony level. And repeated misdemeanors can be charged as felonies in some circumstances. That said, I believe those laws are completely unenforceable and nobody has used them since a nasty divorce case about thirty years ago, and those were just threats to gain an advantage."

"Hypothetical question," Nicole said. "What about telling a guy a girl likes him? That seems totally harmless."

"Is it?" Yuriko inquired. "What if she doesn't want him to know for a good reason, of which you are not aware?"

"What could that possibly be?"

"Does it matter?" Holly asked. "It's her reason and her choice. Even if it seems as if you're helping, you might be doing harm without knowing it. It's better to simply keep the confidence."

"Or encourage the girl to talk to the guy," Jackson said. "That's absolutely OK in my mind, but revealing a confidence? No. I know it happens pretty often the way you suggested, Nicole, but that doesn't make it right."

"So much for High School romances!" Nicole declared mirthfully. "That's how so many of them get started!"

"So, ask her if it's OK to tell him," Elizabeth suggested. "And encourage her as Jackson said. Or, just invite them to a rap session where everyone gets naked and it'll work out!"

Everyone laughed because that was how Elizabeth and Ben had become a couple.

"So it's wrong, even if it works out?" Audrey asked.

"I think it has to be," Emma interjected. "And think about your reputation if you go around revealing confidences. Soon enough, you won't have any real friends, because nobody will be willing to share anything with you."

Audrey made eye contact with me, then with Isabella, and I was positive I'd made the point I'd intended to make.

 Jesse

"Good afternoon, General!" I said, shaking hands with Larisa's dad.

"It has been quite some time since I was a general," Dmitry declared. "I am a professor of military history!"

"Dad still calls Katya 'Comrade Colonel'," I said.

"Your father likes to tease Yekatarina Sergeyevna!"

"Hi, Tatyana Ivanovna," I said.

She kissed me Russian style.

"Hello Jesse Stepanovich!"

I had saved the best for last

"Hi, Larisa!" I exclaimed.

"Hi, Jesse!"

We hugged American style, but not too tight as I didn't want her father to be concerned.

"I have my dad's car," I said. "He's busy setting up for the party tonight. I'll take you to your hotel, wait for you, then drive you to the house."

"That sounds good! Did Lyudmila and Yuri arrive?"

"Yes, Dad picked them up this morning. They're at their hotel resting. Her parents arrived about ninety minutes later and will come to the house with them."

"Good."

Larisa and her parents were only in town for a few days and each had simply packed an overnight bag, so we didn't have to wait for luggage.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

Chelsea and I had arrived home from Cincinnati the previous evening, having had a good time in Ohio. We'd be going back for a long weekend, including MLK Day, to hang out with Pavel, Larisa, and their friends. It was a truly a great group of kids, and I really liked all of them. We'd invited them to visit in Chicago, and there was a good chance they'd come for Spring Break.

"Do you know if Maggie will be at the party?" Chelsea asked.

"No clue. Arby invited her, but I can't predict what she's going to do."

"She needs to find a guy of her own, that's what she needs to do!" Chelsea declared. "I had dibs on you before she even knew you existed!"

"Yes, you did," I said with a silly smile. "And you know darn well I was close to running away from home!"

"And now?"

"Well, the sex is OK, so, I think not."

"OK?! OK?! You brat!"

I chuckled, "You know I'm teasing! But you should also know that's not why I'm with you. I'd love you even if we didn't have sex until we were married."

"Oh, right, like I was going to wait THAT long?" she giggled. "No chance!"

"Obviously! But it's an important point. I want to be with you, and only you, for the rest of our lives, whether or not we have sex. And no, I am NOT suggesting we stop!"

"Obviously!" Chelsea said with a soft laugh.

We arrived at Arby's house and joined a few other guests who had arrived early in the basement.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Albert

"Hi!" I exclaimed when Jane and her family walked into the house just before 6:00pm.

Jane and I hugged, and I shook hands with Doctor Jon, then hugged Amanda. I led them all to the sunroom where my dad and his wives were hanging out, then asked permission for Jane to hang out with me before we went to the party at Amber's house.

"Dad said no kissing until we're fifteen," Jane said quietly. "I want a kiss at midnight! I won't tell if you won't tell!"

"What kind of kiss?" I asked.

"Not a fancy one! Just a regular kiss. The other kind should be in private! You're coming to visit in July, right?"

"Unless your dad decides I'm a threat!" I chuckled.

"He has two wives! He has NO room to talk!"

"He's an amateur!" I chuckled. "My dad has *three* wives and two live-in girlfriends!"

"Don't get any ideas, Mister!"

"I don't think the UCMJ permits that kind of thing! I'd end up in the brig, then dishonorably discharged!"

"I read that you can't be married and attend your military academies."

"That's correct. If you want to marry me, it'll have to be when we're twenty-two or older."

"Don't be divvy! We're already married!"

"By Father Jesse of the Ortho-Ducks Church!" I said with a grin. "I don't think that counts, at least in the Navy's thinking! I meant legally!"

"Who cares that we didn't have a proper Registrar! We've been married five-and-a-half years and haven't even kissed, let alone had a honeymoon!"

"Where am I taking you for our honeymoon?" I asked.

"Could you fly us anywhere?"

"Not alone until I'm seventeen, and then we'd need a plane!"

"Well, we can have *two* honeymoons! One after we have a regular wedding, and one before!"

"Don't let your dad hear you say that!" I declared. "I believe 'no kissing' would include what you're talking about!"

Jane laughed, "Obviously! But that's for the future. Midnight?"

"Nobody next door will rat on us, so, yes."

 Steve

"I had a very good conversation with my dad about moving to Chicago," Emma said as she helped me put out snacks. "He's cool with it."

"And your mom?"

"The custody agreement says I get to decide who I live with during the school year, and the other parent gets the Summer. Once I turn eighteen, it's totally up

to me. Honestly, the only thing my mom cares about is her patients. School ends the first week in June, and I'll fly out right after that."

"What about cramping your dad's style?" I asked.

"He'll live!" Emma declared. "But seriously, I made it clear to him that I don't have a problem with him having a girlfriend, and that between school and friends, I'd be out a lot."

"How much does he know about us?"

"Only that I met you and you provided mentoring along with college and career advice. He knows I'm here, and knows you have a somewhat unconventional family situation, but Mrs. Spencer gushed about you being a great dad and how you helped her daughter through some tough times in High School. And he obviously knows about your company and how successful it is."

"OK. We'll talk more on the 4th," I said.

"Talk?" she asked with an impish smile.

"Among other activities," I replied.

We finished putting out the snacks just as Sofia, Stavros, and Alexa arrived.

"Are we continuing our midnight tradition?" she asked after I'd hugged her and shaken hands with Stavros.

"It wouldn't be an Adams/Katsaros New Year's Eve party without «Nyårsklockan»!" I declared.

"Did everyone from out of town arrive safely?"

"Yes. Including Sweeney and his family, and a large contingent of Russians. Alexa can go next door anytime."

"Bye!" Alexa declared, then made a beeline for the door.

"That was quick!" I chuckled.

"She's twelve going on twenty," Sofia declared. "Just like the rest of the cousins. She was looking forward to seeing Amelia. I take it Jake and Joyce made it."

"Of course."

"Anyone home?" I heard Samantha call out from the foyer.

"Just us cuckoo birds!" I called back.

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Sofia declared mirthfully.

"You ran away from home to join this circus!" I teased.

"I must have been crazy!" she replied with a twinkle in her eye.

Before I could respond, Stan Jakes and Jasmine Prager, my reporter friends, arrived with their spouses, followed almost immediately by Estrella and her boyfriend Paul, along with Alejandra, Trent, and Maria Lucia.

"Mama, can I go with the big kids?" María Lucia asked.

"Yes," Alejandra replied.

"She can walk over with me!" Ashley exclaimed, coming down the stairs.

"Behave, young lady," Trent said to his daughter.

"I'll make sure she doesn't do anything I wouldn't do!" Ashley smirked.

"God help us all!" I chuckled.

"That one is dangerous!" Alejandra declared.

"All of Steve's kids are dangerous!" Doctor Mary Whittaker exclaimed, coming into the great room with Don.

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Sofia declared once again.

VIII. New Year's and a New Year

December 31, 2002, New Year's Eve, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Can I ask you a question, Jesse?" Larisa inquired as we walked next door.

"Of course. What?"

"Are you going to kiss me at midnight?"

"If you want me to, yes, I will."

"I do! Dad said I may have one chaste kiss!"

"Far be it from me to do *anything* that would upset your dad, the general!"

"I think you should be more worried about upsetting me, Jesse Stepanovich!"

"So, it's true what they say about Russian women?"

"My father fears no man, but fears one woman!" she smirked.

I laughed, "I can see that!"

"And you'll dance with me?"

"Yes, of course. I hope it's OK to dance with my other friends, too."

"Yes, of course! We are not a couple. You will know for certain when that would not be appropriate!"

I chuckled, "I hear and obey!"

"As it should be!" she declared mirthfully as we walked into Amber's house.

 Michael

"On January 5th my dad has an entire box at the United Center," I said to Andi as we rode in the car with her mom and dad towards the Hancock Center where the company her dad worked for had booked the entire 95th floor restaurant for a party. "Did you and your dad want to join us?"

"Yes!" Andi declared. "Who are they playing?"

"The Dead Things," I replied.

Mr. Peterson laughed, "I'll have to remember that when I speak to someone from our office in Detroit!"

"I heard it from my dad," I said.

"I assume Eduardo will be there?" Mr. Peterson asked.

"Yes, and my mom, too. I never asked, but what company do you work for?"

"I'm a criminal defense attorney. I'm a founding partner of Grimes, Peterson, Davis, and Hoffman."

"My dad's friend, Melanie Spencer, is a criminal defense attorney," I said. "Do you know her?"

"Yes. We've collaborated with her firm on several cases."

"Dad?" Andi said.

"Yes?"

"Would it be OK for Mike and I to dance and for Mike to kiss me at midnight?"

"Maybe you want to ask ME if it's OK first!" I exclaimed before her dad could answer.

Mr. and Mrs. Peterson both laughed and Andi made a face at me.

"He has a point," Mrs. Peterson said. "What do you think, Joel?"

"I think I'm not ready for my teenage daughter to start dating, that's what I think!"

"And all the time they've spent together over the past three years?" she asked.

"You're not helping your case, Jan!" Mr. Peterson said. "But I'll leave it to you."

"Andi," Mrs. Peterson said, "if, and I mean *if* Mike agrees, a single kiss at midnight is OK."

"Thanks, Mom!"

Andi reached over and squeezed my hand. I thought about jumping out of the car, but we were on the Ronald Reagan Tollway doing at least 70MPH, so that wasn't going to work. Andi and I would have to talk.

 Steve

"Mr. Adams?" a man about my age said, coming up to me. "Bob Hansen, Senior."

"Hi, Bob; please call me Steve."

We shook hands.

"Thanks for inviting us. This is my wife, Marilyn."

"Nice to meet you," I said to her.

"And you," she replied.

"Do you have a moment now to discuss the trip my son asked me about?"

"Of course. Let's go to my study."

We walked there, and I shut the door, then asked, "What did you want to know?"

"Your version, so I can compare it to the one he and Birgit proposed."

I chuckled, "With my daughter involved, a wise course of action."

"I think that makes two of us," he replied with a grin. "Let's just say Bob is very good at telling the truth but conveying zero actual information!"

Which was basically the opposite of Birgit, who was the epitome of "Too Much Information!"

"We're flying down to Saint Martin in a private jet owned by a friend of mine, and we're staying at a house she owns on the French side of the island. Kara and

I are taking Birgit, three of her female friends, and a family friend and her boyfriend. Birgit invited Bob with our permission. There are five regular bedrooms, and both the den and rec room have sleeper sofas.

"The plan is for the girls to double-up in the rooms with two full-size beds, Kara and I will have a room, the family friend and her boyfriend will have a bedroom, and Bob will have one. My wife spoke to the girls' parents, and we agreed they'd be supervised directly at all times, though they'll be allowed to go to the beach that's just across the road from the house if they want, but they won't be permitted to stray from there without either Kara or I tagging along."

"That jibes with what Bob said. He said there's no cost?"

"I'm covering the fuel for the plane, as well as the food at the house. Bob should bring spending money."

"Whose plane is it?"

"It belongs to Spurgeon Capital," I replied. "Samantha Spurgeon, who runs the firm, is a close family friend."

"I think that's all OK, though I have to say I sure didn't have an opportunity like that when I was fifteen!"

I chuckled, "Me, either, though I did go to Sweden for a year as an exchange student. I hate to cut this short, but I have things to do for the party. Enjoy yourselves!"

"Thanks."

 Birgit

"My dad is talking to your dad," Bob said when he came into Amber's house. "I suspect it'll be cool."

"Awesome! You told him what we agreed, right?"

"Do I look dumb?" he asked.

"Well..." I teased.

"Yeah, yeah! I want to ask a question about protocol tonight."

"What about it?"

"What happens at midnight?"

"An orgy, of course!" I giggled.

"I see kids under fourteen, so I know *that* isn't true!" Bob declared.

"We'll have sparkling grape juice and kiss. Is Meghan going to be here?"

"Yes. Her parents were skeptical, but my parents said we'd be closely supervised."

"If you consider Uncle Terry checking on us once an hour 'close supervision'!" I declared. "But seriously, we don't do anything that's out of control. We have an agreement that nobody sneaks into bedrooms or anything like that because the last thing we want is to not be allowed to have our own party."

"How many kids are here?"

"About fifty-five, I think. Le's go to the basement! Kjell is waiting there."

We walked to the door and down the stairs to join the party.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"We're talking about starting a weekly *D&D* game," Ryan said. "Would your ball and chain object to us playing on a Saturday?"

"You won't be playing *anything* if she hears you call her that!" I chuckled. "I think she'll be OK with it. What did you have in mind?"

"A campaign with 3.5 rules, using *Forgotten Realms*. You, me, Arby, Matt W, Nick, and Tara."

"Tara? Seriously?"

"Seriously. She plays."

"Who would DM?"

"We were hoping you would. We all agree you'd come up with the best campaign."

"I'd need a little time to work up at least a starting region," I said. "So maybe start in two weeks? Actually, make it three, because Chelsea and I are going to Ohio the weekend of MLK Day."

"Great! Can we play at your house?"

"I'm sure it'll be OK, but I'll clear it with my mom."

"Excellent!"

He and I grabbed drinks from the mini-fridge, then rejoined the others.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

The party, as always, was a smashing success, with people spread throughout the house playing pool, pachinko, or poker, listening to music and talking or dancing. As was usually the case, my daughters came for daddy daughter dances, and surprisingly, Birgit behaved. In a change from years past, other than Kristin, none of the cousins came to dance with me. That didn't surprise me, really, and even Kristin hadn't danced too close, though she did remind me of our date in May.

I danced with Tabitha, though I was careful not to disrespect her boyfriend, John. Isabella and Emma, on the other hand, both plastered their lithe bodies against mine, though the highlight of the evening was my dance with Kathy, accompanied by Kara's dance with Kurt, though they were not nearly as close together as Kathy and I were.

"You guys weren't nearly as outrageous as you have been in the past," Jessica observed when I finished my dance with Kathy.

"Maybe we're mellowing in our dotage," I chuckled.

"As if, Tiger!" Jessica exclaimed. "You are not old!"

"In all seriousness, she and I discussed it, and because there are a number of relatively new faces here, we felt it better to tone it down a notch."

"It was still hot!" Kara declared. "It's so obvious you two *still* want to fuck each other!"

"'Want to', 'should', and 'doing it' are three very different things!"

"Is there room on your dance card?" Sarah York asked, coming up to us.

"Of course! Is Myles OK with that?"

"He'll be fine so long as we're clothed!" she declared with a smirk.

I took her hand and led her to the dance floor, where we danced close, but not suggestively. When we finished our dance, she went back to Myles, and I turned to walk back to my wives when a pretty girl with long black hair came up to me.

"Hi!" she exclaimed. "I'm Amelia, but I go by Amy!"

"Hi! I'm Steve, but I suspect you know that. You have me at a disadvantage."

"I work at Starbucks, and I'm friends with Danielle, Tabitha, Hope, and Kailey. Will you dance with me?"

I saw Kara smirking and wondered if she knew something, or it was just her usual reaction to a young woman asking for a dance.

"Sure," I said.

I took her hand and led her to a clear spot on the dance floor just as *Shook Me All Night Long* was ending. I had no idea what the next song was on the shuffle mix that was playing via an iPod connected to the stereo, which allowed a hundred songs to play without changing discs or vinyl records. When the song started, I

saw both Kara and Jessica both laugh and roll their eyes as Rod Stewart began singing the first line of a very suggestive song --, '*Stay away from my window...*'

Amy stepped close, and we put our arms loosely around each other.

"Are you a student?" I asked.

"No. I work full time. I had a scholarship to Cincinnati Music Academy, but my dad lost his job after 9-11, so I went to work part time, to help make ends meet, then began working full time when I graduated in June. Hopefully, I can go in August, a year late."

"What instrument?"

"Sax. My parents are both really into jazz, and I've been listening since I was a baby, both live and recorded. When I was eight, I found my dad's old saxophone just sitting in the corner of the living room, picked it up. I really love the rich and soulful tones of the sax, so I started trying to play, but only when my parents weren't around. Right after my tenth birthday, I messed up and my dad heard me trying to play. He took me to a music professor friend of his for lessons, and I discovered I had a real talent. Fast forward five years and I was playing at some local jazz clubs, as well as concert band at Maria."

"I love the saxophone," I said. "It's absolutely my favorite instrument, and I like jazz. Mind if I ask what your dad does for a living?"

"He was a convention planner and the firm he worked for went out of business about three months after the attack. He had a tough time finding a job, so my mom, my brother, and I all got jobs so make ends meet. Dad finally found a job with Jones Lang LaSalle, and starts on Tuesday."

"That's good."

"Interesting song," she said.

I chuckled, "Yeah, not exactly a first dance song."

She smiled and scooted a bit closer, and put her lips close to my ear.

"Sometimes," she whispered, "you have to say 'I want to fuck!'"

 Jesse

"You can hold me closer, Jesse," Larisa said. "I promise I don't bite!"

I almost said 'too bad', but decided that wasn't the best idea.

"I'm not worried about you biting," I replied with a smile. "I'm worried about your dad barking!"

Larisa laughed, "Dad is a big teddy bear!"

"More like a Russian bear! Do you think the West Germans thought he was a teddy bear?"

"He no longer commands a tank army! He teaches military history and political science!"

"Which changes nothing!" I declared.

"Oh, be quiet and dance with me!" Larisa demanded.

She squeezed her arms a bit and pressed her body against mine. There was really nothing I could do but tighten my arms and enjoy the feel of her firm body

against mine. When the song ended, we went to get something to drink, then returned to the basement.

Larisa was pretty, and she was sweet, but she was also only fourteen, and her family was much more conservative than mine. Dad was always very polite and very proper around Tanya and Dmitry, and Larisa was very much like her mom, both in looks and in personality.

"Jesse," Luna said, interrupting my thoughts, "let's dance!"

I agreed, and we joined others on the dance floor.

"How old is she?" Luna asked.

"Fourteen," I replied.

"So, do you prefer blondes with blue eyes or girls with black hair and brown eyes?" Luna asked.

"Yes," I chuckled.

"Redheads with green eyes?"

"I don't have a type the way my dad does!"

"What's his type?"

I smirked, "Athletes with small boobs!"

Luna laughed, "Be serious! Your Aunt Kara looks like a supermodel with boobs I'd die to have!"

"And then you wouldn't be catcher for the softball team!"

 Steve

One of the four girls had talked, and my money was on Danielle, though it could easily have been Hope or Tabitha. It was possible it was Kailey, but I didn't think that was likely. Amy certainly fit the new rule, assuming I accepted Jessica's suggestion to set the limit at eighteen, which was reasonable, given my only objection to girls between eighteen and twenty-one was the absolute age difference.

In the end, it was really up to the girls, not me, to decide if I was 'too old', just as I had concluded it was up to a girl if she wanted to have sex, and I no longer gave them the 'third degree' about it, though 'mindfucks' were still the order of the day, at least for most girls, though there were exceptions such as Emma.

And it was Emma, not to mention my other guests such as Dmitry and Tanya, Lyudmila and Yuri, Alexi and Katya, along with some I hadn't seen in some time -- Stan Jakes and Jasmine Prager from the *Tribune* -- who gave me pause. I also had less than an hour before I was supposed to meet Sofia to prepare for midnight, which was about an hour away. That meant any tryst with Amy would have to wait.

"A very intriguing offer," I replied quietly, "but not one I could act on before Thursday afternoon, assuming you can show me a test paper."

"It's in my back pocket. I work during the day, and I couldn't stay overnight without too many questions."

"8:15pm? You could be home by midnight."

"Do I need to ask permission?" she asked as the song ended.

"No, but they'll get a kick out of it if you're willing."

Amy and I dropped our arms, and she followed me over to where Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne were standing with Kathy, Melanie, and Joyce.

"Hi!" Amy said to Kara. "I'm Amy. Is it OK for Steve to have a play date on Thursday evening?"

All six of the women laughed, and Joyce and Melanie engaged in synchronized eye-rolling. Amy's use of that specific phrase made it clear it had to be Hope, as I was positive I'd never used that phrase with Tabitha or Kailey, and didn't think I had with Danielle.

"He may," Kara said, "so long as you're at least eighteen and have a clean test."

"I am and I do!"

"Then, by all means!" Kara replied. "Right, wives?"

"Yes!" Jessica and Suzanne agreed.

Amy smiled, turned, and walked back to where Tabitha, John, Hope, and Myles were standing.

"Did someone advertise?" Jessica asked.

"I'm going to guess it was Hope, based on Amy using 'play date'."

"You know she didn't have to ask, right, Tiger?"

I chuckled, "She asked me if she needed to ask, and I was curious to see just how confident she was. She propositioned me by whispering a slightly modified line from *Risky Business* in my ear -- sometimes you have to say, 'I want to fuck'."

"You are outrageous, Mr. Adams!" Melanie declared.

"I didn't DO anything except dance with her," I retorted.

"As if YOU have room to talk, Ms. Spencer!" Kathy declared. "I do believe YOU are responsible for Mr. Adams' lifestyle!"

"Whatever!" Melanie exclaimed.

"Your new friend is receiving a lot of attention from those single Naval officers," Joyce observed.

"Twenty years at Leavenworth and a dishonorable discharge," I replied.

"Seventeen doesn't cut it under the UCMJ! Anyway, I need to circulate and talk with friends who aren't here in the attic."

I kissed my wives, then left the attic room to head downstairs.

 Birgit

At about five minutes to midnight, after Jesse, Amber, and I had poured the glasses of sparkling grape juice, I turned off the stereo and got everyone's attention, asking them to get their glass of juice for the midnight toast. My midnight kiss was going to be with Kjell, and I wondered what Jesse would do, given Larisa, Luna, Missy, Brooke, and Shelly were all at the party, along with some other girls I knew liked him. My money was on Larisa.

Amber brought her laptop to a table in the center of the room and opened it, with the screen filled with a digital clock, and when at ten seconds before midnight, we began the countdown, all our voices in unison.

"Ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...three...two...one...HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

I kissed Kjell, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jane kiss Albert, and wondered if they were fooling around. I'd never seen them kiss before, and while it was none of my business, I was curious. I could probably ask Ashley, who would know, but I didn't want to give her the satisfaction!

 Jesse

I touched my lips lightly to Larisa's, judging that a quick peck was the safest course of action, as I could remedy a complaint that it wasn't 'good enough' far easier than I could deal with her being upset because I'd gone further than she wanted to.

"You call THAT a kiss?!" Larisa protested, her blue eyes sparkling in the flashing lights that Amber had triggered.

"Would you like a better one?" I asked.

She nodded, we set our glasses on a table, I took her in my arms and we exchanged a soft kiss.

"Better!" she declared. "And one that won't upset my dad, at least not too much!"

"Self-preservation is high on my list of priorities!" I said with a grin.

Amber put the music back on, and we all began to dance.



January 1, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

The party had finally wound down around 3:00am, and a large number of our friends had crashed at the house, with the usual setup of women in the sunroom and men in the great room, though the guests staying at the hotel in Hyde Park had all taken cabs back to the hotel, and Emma's dad had sent a car for her. I served a buffet-style brunch, and by noon, everyone had left, and I was relaxing with my wives in the Indian room, savoring the last day of my vacation.

The new year was shaping up to be busy and eventful. Demolition would begin on the Annex in the morning, Kara, Birgit, and I had our Spring Break plans, Emma would move to Chicago in June, and during the Summer, Jesse and Birgit would visit Japan. More importantly, I would begin researching what Steve Samet had revealed to me on Christmas Eve. And all of that was in addition to my regular work at NIKA, and the work I was doing for Dante on behalf of SKJ Partners, the LLC in which Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, and I were partners.

"It'll be time to bid on schedules soon," Jessica said. "Given my tenure and position, I can opt for a five-day-a-week, ten hours per day schedule. I was thinking Tuesday through Saturday, 6:00am to 4:00pm. Not only would that give me Sundays off, those are prime trading shifts, and also shifts that are easily covered by a *locum tenens*."

"It's your schedule, Babe," I replied. "What about teaching?"

"Three hours on Wednesday afternoon. Dad mentioned last night they want you to continue the seminars with the incoming class. They're going to institute a

new requirement of attending at least thirty hours of seminars on any topic related to medicine for all new medical students. Basically, most students skipped every Thursday seminar, except yours. They won't be able to count more than ten hours for any specific topic, either."

"I'm enjoying the seminars, so I'm happy to continue. No grades for those seminars, right?"

"Correct. The only change for you is that you'll need to have the students sign-in so they receive time credit."

"That makes it a bit more formal," I replied.

"Yes, but you're still considered a career coach, not a lecturer or professor. Because you refused the stipend and don't accept any fees, there's no problem with any outside involvement with students, whether it's karate, or Philosophy Club, or whatever."

"When Steve is involved, there's always plenty of 'whatever!'" Suzanne declared.

"I take it you noticed that unlike years past, other than my daughters and Kristin, none of the younger girls came to dance with me. Well, Emma, of course, but none of Birgit's friends or any of the cousins. That's a good thing, mind you."

"Are you reconsidering Saint Martin?" Jessica asked.

"No, just saying that given the overall environment, it's probably for the best that fades into the background, and if, and I do mean if, a cousin approaches me privately, then due consideration will be given. But public displays? Those have to give way to the insane puritanism that is sweeping the country from both the right AND the left. We've come to a point where sex is not just repressed, but

demonized and criminalized. I've even heard so-called experts claim that playing 'doctor' is sexual assault or abuse!"

"Which is why Bethany was pressured by her colleagues to 'revise' her book," Jessica observed. "As much as it pained me to see the two of you on the outs, you did the right thing. I notice she didn't dance with you last night."

I shrugged, "I'm not sure if I should read anything into that or not, so I'm not reading anything into it. My only real disappointment was Prajesh, Anala, and Avanti not coming to the party, but I wasn't surprised. Prajesh just cannot handle *Cirque du Steve*. I'm just grateful he tolerates Avanti training at the dojo and Anala and Avanti coming to Philosophy Club at least once a month."

"Changing topics, did you decide what to do about Danielle's friend, Nadia?" Kara asked.

"I'm still thinking about it," I said. "I'm concerned about the whole 'word of mouth' thing getting out of hand."

"Because of the girl who propositioned you last night?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes, and Isabella. Girls like Emma, where it's organic, and develops out of a chance encounter and we click, are very different from ones who are, in effect, sent to me. No matter which way I decide with regard to Nadia, I'm going to start refusing any 'referrals'."

"I think you should allow for an extraordinary circumstances exception," Jessica suggested. "Blanket rules have never worked well for you, and in nearly every case, you've justified an exception. Kimmy and Aisyah being two perfect examples, not to mention fudging your relationship with Cecily in Ohio, so she has an opportunity to work for NIKA."

"I will allow that exceptions can be made in extraordinary circumstances," I agreed. "That said, I'd prefer if the three of you adhered to the 'no referral' rule going forward. I won't apply it to any past referrals, and I will entertain occasional requests from Kara that fulfill her particular kink."

"Thank you, Snuggle Bear!"

 Jesse

"You seem to have as many girlfriends as your dad does, Jesse Stepanovich," Larisa said as we sat on the couch in the Duck's Nest.

"Not even close!" I replied. "Yes, I have plenty of female friends, and I don't date exclusively, but my dad has three *wives* and two live-in girlfriends! I don't want anything like that long term."

"And a regular girlfriend who is the only one you date?"

"When it's time to consider a long-term relationship. I can't say exactly, but sometime between the ages of twenty and twenty-four. Or are you trying to tell me something?"

Larisa laughed softly, "Unlike my mother, I do not wish to discuss marriage until I am at least in college, and probably not until after! You know she wanted to marry your dad when she was sixteen!"

"According to Mom One, my dad was already thinking about who he was going to marry when he was fourteen!"

"Crazy!" Larisa declared. "I can't even imagine! On the other hand, I can imagine you kissing me, if you wish. But remember, kissing is the limit."

"I'd never, ever try to do anything you didn't want to do."

"But you will do anything I want you to?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"A dangerous question! Let's just say that within reason, I'll do my best to make you happy."

"Good! Then please kiss me!"

I put my arm around Larisa's shoulders, she turned her head towards me, and we exchanged a soft kiss.

"That was nice," she said. "Another one?"

I obliged, of course, because I wasn't an idiot, and because she was sweet and gorgeous.

"That was nice, too," she said quietly. "But we should stop."

"OK. What would you like to do?"

"Do you play chess?"

"I do!"

"Then let's do that."



January 2, 2003, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

Nicholas was grumpy when I picked him up just after 5:00am on Thursday morning.

"I can't believe Coach is making us get up this early on vacation!" he grouched as he tossed his hockey bag into the back of Aunt Kara's minivan.

"This is when we have our ice time," I replied. "And we need to get back into our rhythm after more than two weeks off!"

"After school starts, sure, but not during vacation."

"Well, you can go back into your house and be benched, or stop bitching and get in the van."

He climbed into the passenger seat of the van, as I knew he would, and once he fastened his seat belt, I put the van in gear and headed for Johnny's Ice House. I wasn't any more thrilled than Nicholas with being up so early during our break, but I wanted to win the State Championship, so I was more than willing to put up with it without bitching and moaning the way some of the guys did, and there was plenty of it in the locker room as we put on our gear.

"ENOUGH!" Coach Nelson growled. "If you don't want to be here, let me know. I have better things to do on a day off than listen to you ladies whine about how early it is! Now, who's here to play hockey?"

"RAH!" everyone responded, as any other response would have led to extra skated laps or some other form of 'attitude adjustment' applied by Coach.

We finished dressing and went out to the ice. We spent more time stretching, as Coach was concerned that some of the guys hadn't done any exercising over

break. I'd used the free weights each day, but that was it, so I absolutely needed to stretch more. Once that was done, we began our usual drills.

 Steve

I was headed to work for the first time since Christmas, though I would have to park in a lot on Halsted because the alley between the main NIKA building and the Annex was unusable, at least until April. The walk to the office wasn't bad, as the temperature was hovering just below freezing and there was no snow on the ground. I parked, grabbed my bag, locked the car, and walked along Van Buren towards the office.

When I reached the office, instead of going to the front door, I turned left on Peoria so that I could take a look at the Annex. I saw four men on ladders and a crane operator working to dismantle the pedestrian bridge we'd had constructed between the buildings. The new design would accommodate the old bridge, which had saved us some money. I also saw three large dumpsters in the alley between the Annex and main building, and chutes ran from them to the upper floor of the Annex, and while I was standing there, I heard materials clatter down the chute, then thud into a dumpster.

Seeing the work was well underway, I returned to Van Buren and walked to the front door, letting myself in with my security card, as the office didn't open until 8:00am. Lucas wasn't in yet, so I swiped my card to unlock the interior door, then headed up the wide staircase to the second floor, made a left, and walked down the long hallway to the office I shared with Penny, noting that the door to the pedestrian bridge had been covered with plastic sheeting.

"Good morning!" Kimmy said brightly. "The demolition has started."

"I stopped and watched for a moment. Anything pressing?"

"Just me against you!" she said invitingly.

"Business-wise!" I replied.

"Oh," she said flatly, copying my style of response. "Nothing in the mail except a few Christmas cards that arrived late. You have four messages in your voicemail, none of them are pressing."

She knew that because we now had a system that sent our voicemails to *Outlook*, and Kimmy had access to my mailbox.

"Thanks."

"I saw the email from Dante. The flight and hotel should be charged to SKJ Partners, right?"

"Yes. There's no need for a Saturday stay because my deal with Dante is First Class domestically and Business Class internationally. I do have to be in Phoenix first thing on Monday, so I'll fly out on Sunday afternoon. I suspect we'll have a celebration dinner, so return on Tuesday morning, please."

"I'll take care of it! Coffee, tea, or me?"

I chuckled, "Green tea, please, and take three kisses from the box in your desk drawer!"

"What does Penny like to say? You're just no fun!"

"And how much fun would it be if Gary found out?"

"None, of course! You know I'm just flirting!"

"I do. I appreciate everything you do!"

"Thanks! Don't forget the construction meeting at 9:00am every Monday."

"I'll attend today, but I'm not sure I'll go to every meeting. Please remind me twenty minutes before I need to leave for 550."

"Of course!"

I slipped off my street shoes and put on my slippers, then went to my desk. I turned on my PC and my Mac, signed on to both, and began reviewing my email. I'd read some messages during the break, but I'd ignored most of them.

"Morning!" Penny exclaimed, coming into the office about five minutes later. "Anything exciting going on?"

"You're here!"

"Yeah, but you won't do anything about it!"

"Poor baby! I assume you saw the demolition started on the old Annex?"

"Yeah, and that means we have to walk to 550 for our weekly team meetings! And no snacks, foosball, or big screen TV!"

"Again, poor baby. You'll live. Your other option is to move out of this office. I know your answer!"

"NEVER!"

"So, you've made your decision, and have to live with it!"

"But I don't have to like it! What's up for today?"

"Check your email. Backend changes for the next version, and this is our DB schema change release in our cycle."

"Ugh. I hate those with a passion!"

"Not as much as QA and tech support hate them!"

"True. Let me check my email and we can review the new schema. I assume Julia sent it?"

"Yes. She worked a half-day on New Year's Eve and sent it then."

Kimmy brought in my tea, and a few minutes later, Penny and I sat down to review the requested changes to the database schema.

 Jesse

"You must come visit, Jesse," Dmitry said once they had their boarding passes for their return flight to Boston.

"It's going to be a very busy year," I said. "I have four weeks of hockey camp, two of which are training and two of which are coaching, plus Birgit and I are going to Japan for two weeks in August. Maybe during Spring Break?"

"You're welcome to visit us then!" Dmitry said.

We shook hands, but then exchanged the usual Russian greeting. I also exchanged a typical Russian greeting with Tanya, and then Larisa. I thought about kissing her on the lips, but the last thing I wanted to do was have Dmitry more concerned about Larisa than he already was.

"I hope you will visit, Jesse," she said. "Talk to you on the computer?"

"Yes! And call anytime, too!"

She smiled brightly, then the three of them walked to the security line. I waited until they were through, and once they waved, I headed back to the short-term garage where I'd parked Aunt Jessica's BMW which I actually drove more than she did! Just after I paid the \$2 parking fee, my phone rang. I answered and put it on speaker.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi! It's Simone! Are you free before school starts on Monday?"

"It would have to be tomorrow after hockey practice," I said.

"What time is that?"

"Practice ends at 7:00am."

"Whoa!" Simone exclaimed. "When does it start?"

"5:30am," I replied.

"No thanks! How about lunch?"

"Sure. The café on Hyde Park Avenue just east of Woodlawn?"

"Sure! 11:30am?"

"See you then!"

We said 'goodbye' and I closed the phone.

 Albert

"When will you arrive in England?" Doctor Jon asked when they were ready to leave for the airport for their flight to Florida.

"My flight is booked for July 11th, arriving on the morning of the 12th, and then the return flight is July 26th in the late morning."

"Then we'll see you at Heathrow on the 12th!" Jon said. "Send me the time by email."

"I will!"

We shook hands, then I hugged Amanda, who had been a great nanny for us before she'd decided to marry Doctor Jon. I hugged Karen, too, then Jane and I hugged tightly. I wanted to kiss her, but she'd had special permission for New Year's Eve, and I wasn't going to push it.

We released our hug, they all picked up their bags, and I walked them out to their rental car. I helped Doctor Jon load the bags into the trunk, we shook hands, and then I stood on the sidewalk to watch and wave as they drove away. Once the car was out of sight, I went back into the house.

I went up to my room, turned on my computer, and forwarded my itinerary to Doctor Jon and to Jane. Once that was accomplished, I called Peter to see if he wanted to get together. He did, and we planned for him to come over for lunch.

 Steve

"As everyone should have noticed, demolition of the Annex began this morning," Eve said at the start of the meeting. "Demolition is expected to be complete by the end of January, and they'll begin construction on or about February 15th, weather permitting."

"Why the two-week delay?" I asked.

"To allow for contingencies. This way they could lock in the teams to begin on the 15th and not have to worry about having crews idle due to some delay."

"Logical. Sorry to interrupt."

"It's OK," Eve replied. "There are no changes or updates to the plan at this time. I did spend some time at 550 this morning to ensure everything is up and running and there aren't any problems. Dave was happy and said there were no complaints other than from Penny."

"I suggested to Penny that if she was that upset," I said with a grin, "she could move out of my office and Dave would give her one at 550. She declined."

Everyone laughed, including Bob.

"Seeing that there is no way Penny is going to do that," Eve said, "I'll give her complaint the appropriate level of attention!"

"In other words, none!" Elyse declared.

"I don't have anything else this morning," Eve said. "Steve, do you want an invite to future meetings?"

"Yes, but I most likely won't attend unless you flag something that's a problem. Make me optional."

"Will do," Eve said, then ended the meeting.

I went back to my office to work with Penny until the development staff meeting.

IX. Portents of Things to Come

January 2, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

When Penny and I returned from the development meeting in the leased space, I saw that Nadia was online. I still wasn't completely sure about her bondage request, but it was something I could do if I chose to.

NIKASteve: Hi!

DarkDreams82: Hi!

NIKASteve: Can you be at my house in Kenwood tomorrow at 7:00pm?

DarkDreams82: Yes. Which fantasy?

NIKASteve: My preference is the babysitter one. That idea really turns me on!

DarkDreams82: I think that's like every dad's fantasy. Is the other one off the table?"

NIKASteve: No, I was just expressing my strong preference.

DarkDreams82: Do you want to know my plan? To make you more comfortable?

NIKASteve: It's OK to wait to share them face-to-face.

DarkDreams82: And for the babysitter role-play, we can just leave from your house.

NIKASteve: Sounds good

DarkDreams82: What's your address?

NIKASteve: 4937 South Woodlawn Avenue.

DarkDreams82: See you at 7:00pm tomorrow! I'm so excited!

NIKASteve: See you then!

I minimized *adium*, created a test environment, and began working on the schema changes. When Kimmy brought my lunch, Penny left to have lunch with some of the development team, and I pulled up my web browser and created a

free account on ancestry.com. I tried a few searches and confirmed a few things Steve Samet had revealed.

A bit of exploration showed that the actual records currently loaded were limited, though more were being added each day. After spending about thirty minutes, I closed the site, understanding why Steve Samet had hired a private investigator -- there simply wasn't enough information loaded in ancestry.com to conduct a truly thoroughgoing analysis.

While I waited for Penny to return, I checked the news online, and considered my options for finding further information about my dad without him knowing I was doing the research. I wondered if I could get help from Katya, as she would absolutely never reveal anything to anyone, and she might have access to people and documents which were not online, and might never be online. She might even be able to find a record of Lewis Hano having visited the Soviet Union during World War II, which would confirm something important.

Penny arrived back from her lunch and we returned to work on the database schema and the backend modules that directly accessed it.

 Jesse

"I missed you the past two weeks!" Zahra said when she and I met for lunch at a kosher deli on Hyde Park Avenue.

"I missed seeing you, too," I replied. "But Christmas break is always crazy at my house because all the grandparents visit and then we have our New Year's Eve party. This year we also had our Russian friends visit, plus some others from out of town who I don't see very often."

"Did hockey practice start this morning?"

"Yes. Do you plan to come to our playoff games?"

"I do, but unfortunately, my dad wants to come see you play! That kind of messes up Saturday afternoons because he'll want to have lunch with us and then offer to take me home."

"You don't think he suspects, do you?"

"No way! If he did, he'd never let me come to your games or see you outside of school if he thought we were anything more than friends!"

"I'm actually surprised he allows you to be out with a guy without a chaperone or whatever."

"That's my mom's doing; she's not as conservative as my dad. So long as I wear my scarf, dress properly, and am respectful, she trusts me not to behave in ways she would consider improper."

"Are we just having lunch today?" I asked.

"Unfortunately," Zahra said with a frown. "Can I ask about your friend from Minnesota?"

I considered whether I should answer, and if so, if I should provide any details. I decided it was better to actually say what had happened, as that would make a point to Zahra. She'd made the point that neither of us was going to convert, but I still had the feeling that she would very much like to find a way to be exclusive and public, if not find a way to be together longer term.

"I'm pretty sure that's over," I replied.

"Oh? What happened?"

"We had a disagreement about using the sauna, though I think it was really a proxy for wanting to be exclusive."

"I won't go in there naked with anyone else," Zahra replied, "and you don't object. What was her problem?"

The waitress came to take our orders, interrupting the conversation. As soon as she left, I answered Zahra's question about Scarlett.

"She felt I should stop, especially if we were to marry, and she objected to the idea of family saunas."

"I do find it very, very strange that you would be in there naked with your moms and your sisters."

Not to mention the entire softball team, but Zahra didn't need to know about that.

"It's been like that since I was a baby. I think the first time was when I was about two months old, and it's normal for my family, the way it is for many Scandinavians. She objected to that, and to the idea that we'd even be in there with friends. I tried to talk to her about it, but she wasn't interested, and decided to go home."

"Wow! She broke up with you over something way in the future?"

"Yes and no," I replied. "While it was expressly about the future, it's also about my philosophy, which is current. Scarlett -- that's her name -- and I have a fundamental conflict in philosophy that in her mind is a wider gap than you being Muslim and me being Christian."

"That's hard to believe."

Once again, we were interrupted, this time by the waitress bringing our food.

"I think," I said, once we'd started eating, "that based on everything you've said to me, and the fact that you're Birgit's friend, that if the religion issue wasn't in the way, you'd want to be my steady girlfriend and would be willing to at least consider adopting my philosophy. After all, you did remove your scarf for me!"

Zahra laughed, "And everything else! But that was in private! You'd want to be my boyfriend?"

"I honestly don't think it's a good idea to be in an exclusive, committed relationship in High School. Going steady implies that you're thinking that it might be permanent, because if you don't think that, then why go steady?"

"Isn't that normal, though?"

"I'm the *last* person who would be called normal!" I declared.

"No kidding!" Zahra said with a smile. "So if Saturday doesn't work, could I come over after school on Wednesdays? That's the day my mom visits my grandmother, so she's not home before 5:00pm."

"I think that will work," I replied, remembering that Missy and Chung Cha also wanted to get together after school.

"Great!" Zahra said happily. "I'm really looking forward to next Wednesday! And if my dad allows me to hang out with you on Saturday, it'll be a bonus!"

 Birgit

Albert had asked if it was OK for Kjell to hang out with him and Peter and some other guys to watch soccer, and I agreed, which left my entire afternoon free. I had an idea, and invited Tomás to the house, then called Libby.

"Hi, Libby! It's Birgit!" I said when she answered her phone.

"Caller ID warned me!" Libby exclaimed. "And I still picked up!"

"Ha, ha!" I said, rolling my eyes, though she couldn't see it. "What are you doing right now?"

"Nothing. Just hanging out at home. Why?"

"Are you and Lilibeth exclusive?"

"No," Libby replied. "I'm sure you know Jesse and I have been together recently, though that's over."

"Over? Why?"

"I can't say."

I laughed because there was only one reason she would stop fooling around with Jesse, which she couldn't reveal, and that was if she had been with my dad.

"But she wouldn't be upset if you were with someone else?"

"No. Why?"

"Would you be interested in getting together with Tomás and me? I playfully suggested a threesome and that excited him!"

"Duh!" Libby exclaimed. "What straight guy is going to turn down the chance to fuck two girls at the same time?!"

"That's anatomically impossible!" I retorted.

"OK, Miss Pedantic! *Have sex* with two girls at the same time! Would it be 'full participation' or just double-teaming Tomás?"

"If Lilibeth wouldn't object, then full participation."

"So you're still playing for both teams?" Libby teased.

"I play for the straight team, but on occasion, I'll play an exhibition game with the other team!"

"You asked what I was doing now. Are you implying you want me to come over?"

"If you want to. Tomás will be here in about an hour. He doesn't know I'm inviting you."

Libby laughed, "Why, Birgit Adams, you little vixen!"

"You say that like it's a bad thing!" I giggled. "I assume you have an up-to-date STI test."

"Yes! I'll be there in twenty minutes!"

"Cool!"

 Steve

Lucas called just after 2:00pm.

"Steve, I have two FBI agents here who would like to see you," he said.

"Wonderful. Put them in the Tretiak Room and I'll be down with Liz momentarily.

"OK."

I hung up and got up from my desk.

"What's up?" Penny asked.

"FBI, again."

"Do they *ever* stop?"

"Apparently not."

I left the office, changed into my street shoes, then walked down the hall to Liz's office.

"I need you downstairs," I said. "A pair of FBI agents are here."

"About?" Liz asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No idea," I replied.

"You know the drill. Be very careful what you say."

"Yes, Mom!" I grinned.

"That's one fantasy I know you've *never* had!"

"Truth!" I declared.

She and I went down to the lobby and into the Tretiak room, where two FBI agents were waiting.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Steve Adams and this is my corporate and personal legal counsel, Liz Carullo."

"Agent Michael Maseth and Agent Tom Bourgeois," one of them said. "I'm Bourgeois."

We shook hands and all four of us sat down at the round table.

"What can I do for you two gentlemen?" I asked.

"Is Mr. Adams being investigated?" Liz asked, interrupting.

"I can't comment on that," Agent Maseth said. "We're following up on previous interviews. Mr. Adams, Several years ago, you had an interview with a pair of retired agents, Stone and O'Toole."

"Liz?" I inquired.

"Agent Maseth, if my client agrees to answer, we need a written statement that minor errors or omissions from conversations from a decade or more ago won't be charged under 18 USC Part 1, Section 1621."

"We were warned Mr. Adams was only willing to coöperate under certain conditions," Agent Maseth said. "I have a 'Queen for a Day' letter expressly

exempting any statements made today from any charges relating to perjury, omission, or misrepresentation."

He handed Liz a letter from the US Attorney. I knew that limited immunity document meant I could omit things that would potentially get me into trouble. And that meant I needed to marshal my complete set of files, both on the Outfit and on the bent FBI guys. At some point, I might actually need them. I was absolutely certain Melanie could parlay what I had into an full immunity deal, if it came to that.

"I think it's safe to answer about your previous interviews," Liz said once she'd read it.

"Which interviews are you referring to?" I asked. "I had quite a few of them, mostly pertaining to my Russian friends or, later, to Lisa Glass, and to Noel Spurgeon and his accomplices.

"We're interested in Theo Lipari," Agent Bourgeois asked. "You mentioned you knew him."

"Sure. He's a union guy from Hyde Park. We have computer support and maintenance contracts with several IBEW locals, and he's the coördinator."

"You acknowledged in your previous interview that you knew he was a loan shark."

"Actually, that's not accurate, Agent Bourgeois," I replied. "Agent Stone asked me if I knew Mr. Lipari was one of the biggest loan sharks on the South Side, and I said that I had my suspicions. That said, I did state that I was fairly certain he ran a sports book because of something someone at IIT said to me when I was in college or shortly after I graduated, which was in 1985."

"You remember that from an interview in 1995?"

"Let's just say it's in my best interest to remember details of my interactions with the FBI," I replied. "Is there something specific you're investigating?"

"Similar to the question earlier from your attorney, we can't say," Agent Maseth said. "In the interview, you were also asked about Frank Calabrese, his brother, Nick, and two sons, Frank and Kurt."

"I recall saying something along the lines that I'd read their names in the papers, but that's it."

Which was true. That was what I had said to Agents Stone and O'Toole.

"What about James 'Little Jimmy' Marcello?" Agent Bourgeois asked.

"I don't believe he was mentioned in those interviews," I replied. "I do remember reading about the indictments against him in the newspaper. I actually met him back in the late 80s when I was working on union contracts."

"That isn't in your file."

"Nobody asked me about him," I replied. "I was at the Old Neighborhood Italian American Club on West 26th Street to meet a union boss about the contracts I mentioned before."

"What do you do for the unions?"

I looked to Liz.

"That's information they could easily obtain from the testimonial on our website," Liz said with a smile.

"The same things I've been doing for about twenty years," I replied. "I created computer software to track their membership rolls, dues, and other data. We actually sold a modified version of the same software to church organizations in Chicagoland. We also maintain their computer networks."

"In another interview, you admitted working with Alderman Larry Bloom."

I nodded, "Our offices used to be in his Ward, and he helped us with business development, and referred several people to us to consider hiring. That all ended when the 'Conscience of the Council' was indicted. And just to complete the picture, I also met John Christopher through Theo Lipari, but had no more interaction with him than I did with James Marcello. And recently, I've met with Alderman Walter Burnett about our new building.

"As for the Outfit, unfortunately, doing business in Chicago means rubbing up against Wise Guys at some point, especially in transportation and construction. And I'm sure you read all the files about Brandon Littleton, Lisa Glass, and Noel Spurgeon. Maybe if you give me an idea of what you're investigating, I can help, but I wouldn't count on it."

"We can't reveal that at the moment," Agent Maseth said. "Two more names -- Richard D. Ortiz and Arthur Morawski."

"Those are the guys who were shotgunned to death in broad daylight in Cicero in '83," I replied. "I remember because I actually met Richie Ortiz, again, through Theo Lipari. Richie was a contact for installing software and reporting bugs before he was gunned down."

"And that didn't give you pause?" Agent Bourgeois asked.

"Me? No. I was shocked, but then again, it was in Cicero in the early 80s. As for being concerned, I've had some fairly upset customers in the past, but nobody was ever upset enough to come after me with a shotgun! Littleton was murdered and Noel Spurgeon broke out of prison. I took those things in stride, too. Those were FAR more risky than meeting the Wise Guys. I was much more worried about the pimp who pulled a knife on me when I rescued a girl he was trying to lure at Union Station."

"We don't have that one in our file."

"As thick as my file most certainly is, I'm surprised. Talk to the Chicago PD. It was August 1996."

"Two more names -- Anthony Spilotro and Michael Spilotro."

"Other than knowing what was in the papers, no."

"OK," Agent Bourgeois said. "That's all we have for now. Thank you for your time, Mr. Adams."

We shook hands, and they left.

"My office," Liz said curtly.

I followed her upstairs, down the hall, and into her office. She motioned for me to close the door, and I did.

"What?" I asked.

"As your business and personal counsel, I advise you to call Melanie Spencer immediately."

"Based on that conversation?"

"It's what they didn't say. I'm not going to ask, because I'm not a criminal defense attorney, but they don't show up with 'Queen for a Day' letters for anyone who *isn't* a potential suspect. They're for cooperating witnesses."

"Then why did you allow me to answer their questions?"

"The questions were all about interviews you've given in the past. They didn't ask you about anything you did or any of those men did, so with the letter, you could safely answer those. Call Melanie. Right now."

"I honestly think you're overreacting," I replied. "But I'll call Melanie and let her know what happened."

"Good. Take the letter with you."

I accepted the letter from Liz, then left her office and went to the empty Lemieux Room and dialed Melanie's mobile phone.

"Hi, Steve!" she said, clearly having seen the Caller ID.

"Hi, Melanie. I just had a visit from the FBI and Liz suggested I call you because of what happened."

"Come to my office," she said. "Do not speak over the phone. I'm free right now."

"I'll be there in about fifteen minutes," I said.

We said 'goodbye' and I closed my phone, then went back to the office to let Kimmy know I was going to be out for the rest of the afternoon.

 Birgit

"I thought we were going to mess around," Tomás said, keeping his voice low, when he saw Libby in the great room.

I giggled, "We are, if you're man enough to handle it!"

"WHOA!" he gasped. "SERIOUSLY?! You're not messing with me?"

"Come upstairs with us and we'll mess with you and blow your mind! Interested?"

"Do I look like an idiot?!" he asked, incredulous.

I took his hand and led him up the stairs, with Libby following us. We went to my bedroom, and when all three of us were inside, I closed and locked the door.

"There's only one rule," I said. "You cannot brag about this to your friends. Agreed?"

"I agree!" Tomás declared emphatically.

"Then," I smirked, "let's get naked and we'll fulfill your every fantasy!"

Tomás quickly undressed and Libby and I did the same, while Tomás stood wide-eyed, like a deer caught in headlights, his dick rock-hard and twitching in anticipation.

"Any limits?" I asked Libby.

She smirked, "Anything you can do, I can do better!"

"We'll just have to see about that!" I declared.

We both moved over to where Tomás was and stood so he could wrap one arm around each of us, then kissed each other in turn, me kissing Tomás, Libby kissing Tomás, and then Libby and I exchanging a sexy French kiss.

"Wait!" Tomás exclaimed in surprise. "You two are going to do stuff together?"

"Yes!" I declared with a silly smile.

"Let's give him a joint blowjob," Libby suggested, "then show him what girls can do together!"

"I've died and gone to heaven!" Tomás said giddily.

And, for the next three hours, we proved that to be true! A joint blowjob, followed by Libby and I French kissing, then she and I sixty-nined. After that, we got Tomás hard, and I rode him while Libby straddled his face. For the next round we switched places, then Libby and I sixty-nined, followed by Libby showing Tomás how to tit-fuck her, with me licking his cum from her. When that finished, Libby and I took turns using our mouths to get Tomás ready, then having him fuck us hard.

"Happy?" I asked him as the three of us got into the shower together.

"Are you kidding?!" Tomás asked, clearly dazed by the experience.

"Keep quiet about this, and it could happen again," Libby said. "Right Birgit?"

"Absolutely!" I agreed.

 Steve

"Liz is correct," Melanie said. "In my experience, these limited immunity letters are only given to cooperating witnesses. In order for me to protect you, I need to know *exactly* what it is they think you've done or are doing."

"It started when I was fourteen and met Joyce's grandfather," I said.

"What started?"

"My involvement with the Mafia or «La Cosa Nostra» or the Outfit, or whatever name you want to use."

"Please tell me you're joking!"

"It's no joke, Mel."

"And the initial investment for NIKA? Was that Outfit money?"

"The money Don Joseph invested was all from legitimate sources, and provably so. He was working to go 'legit', as they say, and Joyce has *never* been involved in any of the illegal stuff. That was all her little sister, Connie, and Connie's husband, Anthony."

"I think you need to start at the beginning. I have about ninety minutes, so if we need more, you'll need to come back. We should only discuss this in this office, and literally nowhere else. I'm going to take notes, but they'll be locked in my safe, and labeled as privileged."

"It all started the day I met Joyce," I began again.

About seventy-five minutes later, Melanie put her pencil down diagonally on her legal pad.

"Now tell me why you aren't at all concerned."

"Because I have sufficient information to put two FBI agents in prison for the rest of their lives," I said. "And it's all documented and verified. I also have evidence I can turn over to the government to prove everything I said before."

"You do realize they could charge you with felony murder, right?"

"Only one person could testify to that, and he's never been arrested."

"Theo Lipari?"

"Yes. If he's ever arrested, then it's your job to negotiate a deal. That murder is unsolved, and I can solve it for them, not to mention all the other stuff I have."

"Where is that?"

"Someplace *nobody* can get to," I replied. "There's a package in the custody of Colonel Yekatarina Sergeevna Anisimova, KGB, retired, Hero of the Soviet Union."

"Of course it is! Does she know the contents of the package?"

"No. If something happens to me, get in touch with her and say «Друг познаётся в беде» (*Drug poznayotsya v bede*). I'll write it out phonetically for you. You have to say it in Russian."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a Russian proverb -- 'A friend is found out in a misfortune'. If she hears that exact phrase, in Russian, from one of four people, she'll send the package to you."

"So, who are the other three who know about this?"

"Joyce, obviously; Elyse knows Don Joseph was in the Mafia, and that I had some involvement back in High School and college. Beyond that, only Becky van Hoek, as I said, and nobody is going to trace anything to her to even ask questions. And if they did, she'll practice «omertà» better than any Sicilian. But all three of them know the code phrase and when to use it."

"I think you should get out in front of whatever is going on," Melanie advised.

"I disagree. First, unless Theo turns state's evidence, which I do not see happening, there are no links to me other than having met some of the Wise Guys. Second, the only way Theo turns state's evidence is if he's arrested, and even then, I doubt he'd talk. That said, if and when he's indicted or arrested, THEN it's time to go to the US Attorney with a deal. Before then, why stir up a personal hornet's nest?"

"Being arrested is not a good look, even if you walk."

"No, it's not, but again, unless and until Theo is arrested, there are no traces, and I haven't done anything illegal in well over a decade. For all intents and purposes, I'm out."

"And your ties to Anthony Cicilioni?"

"There are no ties between the Chicago Outfit and Little Tony," I said with a smile. "He basically closed up shop in Cincinnati under pressure from black and Hispanic gangs. The Marble Palace Inn and the adjacent restaurant are completely legit. I know Anthony runs an escort service, but it's a separate business, and it's outcall only. The girls are forbidden from being in the hotel or restaurant under any circumstances."

"Nobody is going to bother an escort service in Newport, Kentucky!"

"Exactly. He has protection for that, too. But let's say they do bust the escort service. Anthony pleads and continues to run his legitimate businesses. He expressly sought capital from me so that he didn't have to use any proceeds from his escort business or from when he was running the small Mafia operation in Cincinnati, to open the hotel."

"I honestly think you should cut your deal now."

"Cut what deal? We have no idea what the Feds are onto. Wait for the indictments or the arrests, then we'll see what happens. The key is going to be Theo. What happens with him will determine what I do. And, as I said, I have plenty of evidence with which to deal."

"You can prove those two agents took money from Noel Spurgeon?"

"I can. I have all the transaction records and proof of the money flow."

"I don't like it, but the client decides."

"Trust me, Melanie, I'll know if they're actually after me personally. Right now, I think they're investigating the Outfit, and my name showed up in a search. The big names in Chicago are either in prison or retired -- the Calabreses, James Marcello, and Joey 'The Clown' Lombardo.

"Angelo 'The Hook' LaPietra, Anthony 'Joe Batters' Accardo, Joseph 'Joey Doves' Aiuppa, Samuel 'Sam Wings' Carlisi, and Joseph 'Mr. Clean' Ferriola are all dead. The only one left is John 'No Nose' DiFronzo, who had his conviction overturned on appeal. The Outfit is mostly run to ground, and what's left is the unions, trucking, and construction."

"You just reel off those names!"

"Let's just say it was in my best interest to know what was going on at any time."

"The next time the FBI comes calling, call me before you even say 'hello'," Melanie said. "I'm not kidding. The only words from your mouth should be 'I want to speak to my attorney, Melanie Spencer'. Just keep repeating that, no matter what they ask, including if you want a drink of water or they ask you the time."

"I honestly don't expect them back," I said. "Well, OK, the FBI has an unhealthy fixation on me, but that's mostly due to my Russian friends, Brandon Littleton, Chicago Aldermen, and Noel Spurgeon."

"Speculate."

"They're trying to build a case against the remaining Outfit bosses and potentially solve some murders. If they can decapitate the Outfit, it'll die. Of course, the vacuum that creates will immediately be filled by black or Hispanic gangs, along with the usual graft and corruption."

"You weren't worried about being implicated by Larry Bloom or the other Aldermen?"

"Not really. I met with them for legitimate business reasons. I made absolutely sure I documented every meeting with a business purpose, and I still have those notes. There is no physical evidence of any kind that would tie me to any of their criminal activity. Once again, it all comes down to Theo Lipari. He's managed to never be arrested in the twenty-two years I've known him. That's saying something."

"What about Ed Krajick?"

"He didn't give it up when he was arrested for murder or for corruption, and he doesn't know about anything I did. As I said, he was kicked out by Don Joseph and later went back with Anthony, but by that time, I was basically out."

"I still don't like it, but I have to follow your instructions."

"For the first time in your life!" I chuckled.

"Not even close!" Melanie protested. "I had to follow your instructions to have my Prom!"

I chuckled, "OK, then for the second time!"

"You sent me back to Pete!"

I rolled my eyes theatrically, "You know what I meant, Ms. Spencer! You nearly always get your way!"

"I need to get going," Melanie said. "Keep me posted and I'll keep my ear to the ground."

"Say nothing to anyone, Mel. I'm not going to go into Witness Protection, so the only way I do this is if Theo is indicted. I'd prefer very much to let sleeping dogs lie."

"You know I'm forbidden from revealing anything you've told me unless you express an intent to commit a crime."

"Which doesn't mean you can't snoop. Please don't. I don't want them suspicious in any way, shape, or form. I think the letter was, contra you and Liz, simply

because they knew I'd stonewall them otherwise. I do have a history of telling them to pound sand, not to mention all the BS around Noel Spurgeon. I also have a history of coöperation, with regard to Spurgeon and Hart-Lincoln."

"It won't surprise you that I knew several of the partners who went to prison."

"I'd actually have been surprised if you hadn't known anyone there. Honestly, between that and Spurgeon, I don't think the Feds suspect me of anything, other than perhaps knowing more than I'm letting on. That's possible, but not probable, given they only asked about names I'd mentioned before, plus a couple of Wise Guys who were in the papers. If they come back and ask specific questions, then I'll have an idea of what it is they're investigating."

"It's a risky game, but it is yours to play."

"Thanks, Melanie."

We hugged, and as Pete wasn't around, she simply gave me a quick pack on the cheek, and I left her office. I walked to my car, which I'd parked in a garage adjacent to their offices, and headed home.

 Matthew

"So what do you think about me playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with the gang on Saturdays?" I asked as Chelsea and I relaxed on the couch in Eduardo's townhouse in the city.

"I think it's OK," Chelsea replied. "I can do homework or hang out with some of my friends from Loyola. How long do you expect to play?"

"Probably from sometime in the morning until dinner. We have to work out the details, and I need to create a world in which we'll play."

"How will that work with our trip to Ohio for the long weekend?"

"Got it covered!" I replied. "I suggested we start the following week."

"Great!"

"Are we going to the hockey game on Sunday?" I asked.

"Sure! Your brothers will all be there, right?"

"Yes, and probably Birgit. Stephe and Ashley aren't interested in hockey. I do want to go to my brother's first playoff game on the 11th. It's at Johnny's Ice House."

"Absolutely!"

We were interrupted when my mobile phone rang. The Caller ID said 'Maggie Home'. I sighed and answered.

"Matt Adams."

"Matt? It's Mary Jones, Maggie's mom. Have you heard from Maggie?"

"No. I didn't see her at the New Year's party at Arby's, and then Chelsea and I came into the city the next morning. Why?"

"She left the house this morning saying she was going for a walk, but that was eight hours ago, and I haven't seen her since. I was hoping she was at your house, but you're in the city."

"You could call my mom and ask her," I said. "I know Maggie has talked to my mom in the past, but Chelsea and I have been at Eduardo's townhouse since yesterday, around noon."

"OK. I'll call your mom. Do you know anyplace else she might have gone?"

"The only kids she hung out with who weren't from your church are in drama, so I suppose you could try Nick, Josh, Matt W, Arby, Nellie, or Tara. Maggie should have a sheet of paper from drama with everyone's name and number."

"She does. It's on the corkboard in her room. If she calls you, will you ask her to call me? And then call me and let me know?"

"I will."

"Thanks."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"Is something wrong?" Chelsea asked.

"Maggie's mom said that Maggie went out for a walk this morning and hasn't come home. That was eight hours ago."

"Oh, no!" Chelsea gasped.

"I wouldn't worry too much," I said. "It's only 4:40pm. If she doesn't show up for dinner in about ninety minutes, then I'd be a bit concerned. If she doesn't come home by bedtime, that's when I'd call the cops."

"That's how you'd deal with it if it were your kid?"

"Kids need time and space. You know what I do to get away."

Chelsea laughed, "You sit in your closet with a pillow and blanket and read books by flashlight!"

"Hey, it's quiet and nobody bugs me!" I declared.

"What are we doing for dinner?" Chelsea asked.

"Let's see what's in the fridge and cook together."

Chelsea agreed, so we go up and went to the kitchen.

 Birgit

"So, now you've had three members of my family," I teased Libby after Tomás had left.

"How did you know?" Libby asked.

"Because the only reason you'd stop fooling around with Jesse is if you were exclusive, which you said you weren't, or you were with my dad!"

"Oops," Libby smirked. "Busted."

"Whatever! You know I don't have a problem with that!"

"I'm going to start going to your dad's Philosophy Club starting on Sunday."

"Does Jesse know?"

"Yes. I decided I need to be with the adults, and your dad agreed. Jesse said he's going to schedule Hangouts for the opposite Sundays and have them at your house because nobody else can host. I'm pretty sure he spoke to your dad about it."

"Nobody tells me anything!" I groused.

"So not true!" Libby countered. "And I only discussed it with Jesse at the New Year's Eve party. He mentioned that Tabitha and John will start coming to Philosophy Club instead of the Hangout, and some of Luna's friends and some of the hockey team will come to the Hangout."

"So you and Tabitha are graduating?" I asked.

Libby smiled, "I told your dad that now that I'm seventeen, I wanted to have my first fuck with an actual adult, and then participate in the adult discussion group. Tabitha had to adjust to life away from her crazy, fanatical religious family and friends. She's really different now from how she was when she first moved here from Ohio."

"Being expertly deflowered by my dad has that effect on girls!" I giggled.

"I suspect the same would be true of Jesse, though I wasn't a fanatical Christian when he got my cherry! Kjell got yours, right?"

"I was actually with Lilibeth before Kjell, so I suppose it depends on what you mean. And really, society is WAY too hung up on the idea of virginity, and fetishizes it. It really is just a sign of transitioning from child to adult, like getting your driver's license, voting, and being able to legally buy alcohol."

"Can I ask how many guys or girls you've been with before today?"

"You're the tenth; four girls and six guys. But only two of the girls were one-on-one."

"And you aren't interested in that anymore?"

"No. What we did today is fine, and I really enjoyed it, but I don't have a desire to be with girls the way I do with boys. You like both equally, right?"

"Yes, which is why I want an arrangement like your dad's -- me, a guy, and a girl. And after being with you and Tomás today, I'd be happy to have that be a regular thing!"

"What about Lilibeth?"

"It's temporary, and we both know it. She's moving back to Boston as soon as she graduates, and she'd never even get into the same bed with a guy. You and Tomás are kind of regular, right?"

"Not committed, but we see each other a lot. He can sleep with whoever he wants, and so can I. I'm not even close to being ready to commit to a single dick for the rest of my life!"

Libby laughed, "Or a tongue and a dick in my case! But I was serious. I really liked what we did today, and it's exactly what I want and need. Think about it, OK? I'm not saying make a commitment, but the three of us can have fun together regularly. I think between Tomás and me we can keep you satisfied."

"Don't count on it!" I giggled.

 Steve

As I drove home, I contemplated the interview with the FBI, and the conversations with Liz and Melanie, and I concluded I'd chosen the right course of action -- wait and see. I didn't want to become involved unless my hand was forced, as being involved would require me to reveal things to my family and friends that I preferred to be kept secret. It wasn't a perfect solution, because I risked arrest, but I felt the risk was small.

"Hi, Dad!" Birgit exclaimed when I walked into the house through the back door.

"Hi, Mr. Adams!" Libby called out.

"Hi, girls," I replied.

"I'm going home for dinner, Birgit," Libby said.

She and Birgit hugged, and as she walked past me, she winked. I simply smiled in return.

"How good was she?" Birgit asked once Libby was out the door.

"As if that would be any of your business, Nosy Daughter!" I challenged.

Birgit rolled her eyes, "Oh, please! She's been flirting with you for at least six months!"

"You've been flirting with me for six years!" I countered. "And nothing happened."

"That's on you, not on me!" Birgit declared.

"You know why, Pumpkin."

"Dinner is ready in ten minutes," Yuriko said, coming into the great room.

"I'll go change," I said, acknowledging her, just as Kjell and Albert came into the house.

I went upstairs, changed, and then headed back downstairs to join my family in the dining room.

X. Only What's On The Menu

January 2, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Ashley

"I hear you have a guest tonight, Dad," I said with a smirk as we walked home from the dojo on Thursday evening.

"Listen, you little scamp..." Dad growled.

"Excuse me," I said, "but all complaints about the operation of this unit must be referred to the manufacturer! The unit cannot take any complaints directly!"

Kara Mom, Mom, Suzanne, Birgit, and Stephe all burst out laughing.

"Well played, young lady," Dad chuckled. "Well played."

I saw Birgit frown, obviously unhappy *she* hadn't thought of it, and Stephe rolled her eyes despite having laughed with everyone else. Those were precisely the responses I expected from them!

"In all seriousness, Cinderella," Dad said, "you're pushing the limits."

I was, but he'd also made a point of not teasing in front of people outside the family.

"You said it was OK to tease when it was just family!" I said. "Only your wives and daughters are here!"

"She has a point, Tiger," Mom said mirthfully.

"And we know *exactly* where she gets it!" Dad declared. "It's a factory-installed option! I provided only the tiniest bit of raw material and had nothing to do with the manufacturing process!"

"Given Birgit and Jessie are both serious smart alecks, I'd say it comes from that raw material you provided, Tiger!"

"It's possible," Dad chuckled.

 Steve

"Ashley is a real pistol," I said to my wives as we relaxed in the Indian room while waiting for Amy to arrive.

"And whose fault is that?" Kara teased. "You're just as bad as the kids, or maybe they're just as bad as you!"

"In the immortal words of Empress Birgit the First of Kenwood -- What-ever!"

"Did you ask any of the girls about Amy?" Jessica inquired.

"No. All I know about her is that she works with them at Starbucks, lives at home, plays the saxophone, is hoping to attend Cincinnati Conservatory in the Fall, has a clean STI test, and wants to fuck. I will ask her who provided the referral."

"Do you have a suspect?" Suzanne asked.

"At first, I thought Danielle, but the more I thought about it, the more I suspect it was Hope, mainly because of the 'play date' request. I'm not upset, mind you, but I will discourage whoever it was from marketing my services."

"We could make a fortune from stressed medical students!" Jessica declared. "I'll just hand out flyers offering stress relief and a price list! 'Need to forget?' 'Have your brains fucked out!'; 'Need to relax? 'Cunnilingus in the sauna!'"

"Because that won't land us all in jail and have you fired!" I chuckled.

"Jess, don't forget 'Special discount for virgins!'" Kara said mirthfully.

"And the 'Combo discount packages'," Suzanne suggested "

The doorbell rang just then, and I stood up.

"Saved by the bell!" I chuckled.

I left the Indian room and went to the foyer to open the door and greet Amy. I helped her remove her coat, then led her to my study, where I indicated one of the leather wingback chairs. She sat down, and I sat next to her.

"Is something wrong?" Amy asked.

"No," I replied. "Whoever gave you the referral didn't say I'd talk to you first?"

"Referral? I'm not sure what you mean."

"Referral. You clearly knew it was OK to ask me, and you had an STI test, so it was obvious to me that one of the girls provided a reference, as it were, and sent you to me."

"I take it that's happened before?"

"More than you might imagine."

"I have a pretty good imagination! But that's not what happened. The five of us were talking one morning about guys and sex and first times, and I had the impression that all four girls had been with the same guy for their first time. In the conversation, they mentioned the guy had a rule about STI tests and one of them, and I won't say which, said she would never have expected to have her first time with a married guy.

"Later on, I asked Hope if my impression was true, and she confirmed that all four of them had been with the same guy their first time and weren't exaggerating about how great it was. A few days later, she invited me to the party, saying the other girls would also be there. She said nothing that linked you to the guy they were discussing. Then, when I saw you dance with so many girls, and some of them very, very close, I deduced you had to be the guy. Learning you had three wives confirmed it."

"And how did you know you might need permission?"

"After I figured it out, I decided I wanted exactly what they'd all described, so I asked Hope directly. She reluctantly confirmed it and suggested I might need permission. I figured if I was going to come right out and ask you to fuck, then asking for permission from your wives was no big deal."

"OK, but you used a very specific phrase when you asked."

"Hope told me you were allowed to have 'play dates' when I asked the question about you. Honestly, she didn't volunteer anything specific until I concluded you'd been each of the girl's first, and I specifically asked her about it. I can tell you're suspicious by the questions you're asking."

"Sorry, but the 'referral' thing has gotten out of hand more than once in my life. I apologize for the assumption and won't concern myself about what the girls said. I do have a pair of questions for you, which you don't have to answer -- why now? why me?"

"Why now? Because, like every other teenage girl on the planet, I've thought about it since I had my first period. I had expected to be in college by now, and I thought college was the time and place it would most likely happen. Obviously, college was delayed because of what I described while we were dancing. My decision to have sex was more about being an adult than anything.

"As for why you? I didn't date much in High School, but I went to pretty much every dance starting in eighth grade. I did go on a few one-on-one dates, but the guys weren't really worth my time. I've dated a bit since I graduated, but none of the guys made me feel the way you did just being in the same room with you, and certainly never like I felt when we danced."

"Not to overanalyze," I replied, "but I think the vibe was very likely, or at least partially, due to what you'd heard the girls say. You weren't, as it were, playing roulette and hoping you hit your number. Your expectations were set, and when you were at least somewhat attracted to me, that closed the deal in your mind."

"More than 'somewhat'," Amy said. "You're handsome, in great shape, have killer bedroom eyes, and word on the street is you're fantastic in bed. So, how about it? Do you want to fuck?"

"Indubitably!"

She pulled a folded paper from her pocket and handed it to me, revealing a clean STI test when I unfolded it. I folded it and handed it back.

"I started taking the pill when I turned eighteen back in May when I was still hoping to start school in August," Amy said.

Which was consistent with her narrative.

"I had a vasectomy," I replied. "So, no worries there. Did you have something specific in mind?"

"You're allegedly the expert, so I think I'll leave that to you!"

"Allegedly?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Allegedly! Would you state something like that to be true without first-hand knowledge?"

"I would not. Let me rephrase the question - is there anything you *don't* want to do?"

"I'll just tell you 'no' if there's something I don't want to do."

"OK. Shall we repair to the boudoir?"

Amy laughed, "'Boudoir'? 'Indubitably'? I love your quirky style."

I took her hand and led her to the Playroom, past Ashley, who was having a snack in the kitchen. I strongly suspected her timing was strategic, given the smirk on her face.

 Birgit

"My sister is a pain in the butt!" I lamented to Kjell in Swedish as we sat in the sauna with the 'Privacy Please' sign on the door.

"I thought Stephie had mellowed," Kjell said.

"Not her; Ashley!"

"Seriously? She's cute and sweet!"

"You have *no* idea!" I retorted. "She's a total smart aleck!"

"As if you have room to talk!" Kjell declared. "I think you're jealous because you aren't the only one like that! Well, Jesse, but guys are different."

"Talk about the understatement of the century!" I giggled.

"Oh, right, because girls aren't different, too? Seriously, besides anatomy, you and Jesse are a lot alike! I bet that's what bugs you about Ashley, too!"

"What-ever!" I protested.

"You know, the sauna is supposed to be relaxing!"

He had a point, though Ashley was annoying, especially with her claim that she knew something about Dad that had affected his decision.

"Sorry," I said. "She just gets on my nerves."

"I could help with that," Kjell offered.

"Possibly! Before we do that, was there anything special you wanted to do before you go home on Saturday?"

"Not really," Kjell replied. "Well, unless you want to invite a friend..."

I laughed softly, "Every boy's fantasy! Two girls at once!"

"You can't blame a guy for asking!" Kjell exclaimed. "I'm cool with just hanging out. We probably won't see each other during the Summer, right?"

"Right. I'm going to Japan and also to Vermont."

"I know you visit your friend in Vermont, but what are you doing in Japan?"

"Jesse is going to visit a girl who was an exchange student here, and I'm going to spend time with Yuriko. I'll also visit the karate school where our overall master teaches, but I won't be able to train there."

"Why?"

"No girls allowed!" I replied.

"Seriously? And you're OK with it?"

"It's «Shihan» Hideki's school, and that's the tradition in Japan. He has no problem with me being 1st Dan, nor with Sensei Molly running her own school, but he has to honor Japanese tradition."

"I think it's wrong," Kjell said.

"As Dad likes to say, the Japanese people get to run their country as they see fit, just as we get to run ours, and we're hardly in a position to make moral objections to things in other countries until we fix our glaring problems."

"That would be an argument against stopping Hitler!"

"Godwin!" I giggled.

"Huh?"

"The rule is that every discussion, no matter what, eventually leads to a reference to Hitler or the Nazis! As Dad says, the first person to reference Hitler or the Nazis to make a point about something completely unrelated concedes they've lost the argument!"

"OK, but my point is the same. At some point, you do intervene."

"I agree, but the US and Sweden both segregate sports teams by gender, from what you call football, to tennis, to golf, to ice hockey, to almost anything else you can name. If 'all boys' is wrong, then 'all girls' is equally wrong. You can't pick and choose."

"You won't accept them saying it's different with sports, will you?"

"No, because you could call karate a sport. In our competitions, we have four classes -- open, women's, under eighteen, and senior. I always compete in the 'open' class because that's the one that determines the overall champion. But some girls and women don't want to spar with boys and men. I do, and beating a boy is awesome because it means I won, but also because I beat a boy!"

"Of course," Kjell chuckled.

"Let's use the whirlpool," I suggested.

Kjell, not being a «jävla idiot», quickly agreed.

 Steve

"What time do you have to leave?" I asked.

"So long as I'm home by midnight, nobody will ask any questions," Amy replied. "It's only a twelve-minute walk, so to be safe, let's say out the door at 11:30."

"That gives us about three hours," I said as I turned on the shelf stereo, which was tuned to WXRT. "May I propose a course of action in advance?"

"Sure."

"I'll give you the absolute best possible first time I know how, then we sixty-nine to get me hard again, you ride me, but then, right before I cum, we switch to sixty-nine, and I cum in your mouth, and you swallow. We continue until I'm hard again, then fuck hard. The fourth time is your option. Then a blowjob in the shower."

Amy laughed, "Over the top much?"

"We could also do it once, and then you could go home if that's what you prefer."

"I think I signed up for 'over-the-top' when I asked you to fuck!"

"Then why are you still dressed?" I asked with a grin.

Amy laughed and began removing her clothes, and I followed suit, taking note of her perfect 'Steve type' body -- athletic with small, firm breasts and flat stomach -- and, as was a growing trend, a smoothly shaved mons.

"Should I be offended?" she asked, looking at my groin.

I chuckled, "No. I don't need it ready for action just yet!"

I stepped over to Amy and held out my arms. She melted into them, and we exchanged a soft French kiss. I broke it a minute later, pulled the duvet down on the bed, and helped Amy into it. I followed my usual pattern of sucking on each of her nipples before kissing my way down to her mons, then pressing my tongue into her and bringing her off twice. After her second orgasm, I moved up, grasped my now fully erect shaft, rubbed my glans along her slick labia, and positioned myself.

"Fuck me," Amy pleaded breathlessly.

I nodded, then pushed slowly forward.

"Yeah," Amy breathed. "Yeah."

Two more gentle thrusts were all it took to fully embed myself in her tight tunnel and bring my pubic hair into contact with her smooth mons. Amy took a deep breath, let it out, then wrapped her arms and legs around me. I ground against her a bit, then began moving slowly. I lowered my lips to her, and our tongues tangled as we started a slow, gentle screw that lasted twenty minutes before I came. As I so often did, I pulled out, slid down, and pleased her with my tongue until she had another orgasm.

"I came to the right place!" Amy declared contentedly as I moved up next to her.

"And I'll make sure you cum a lot more!" I chuckled.



I was checking hockey scores when my IM chimed, and I saw a message from Akiko.

安希子: Hi! How are you?

MightyDuck: Great! You?

安希子: Also great! I'm looking forward to August!

MightyDuck: Me, too! Is it Saturday there?

安希子: Yes! Just after 10:00am! Please provide your flight information. I want to meet you at Narita.

MightyDuck: We arrive on August 4th at 10:00am Japan time.

安希子: OK. What will Birgit do?

MightyDuck: Yuriko will travel to Tokyo to meet her.

安希子: Good. If she wanted to visit Hiroshima, she could spend a day or two with us at the end of the trip. If you wanted.

MightyDuck: I'll ask her.

安希子: Dad and Mom said it would be OK for her to visit.

MightyDuck: Excellent! No school today?

安希子: No. You start again on Monday, right?

MightyDuck: Yes.

安希子: And the hockey tournament starts in a week?

MightyDuck: Yes.

安希子: I wish I could see you play! Good luck!

MightyDuck: Thanks.

安希子: I will let you go. I miss you a lot! I can't wait until we can share my futon!

MightyDuck: I'm looking forward to that!

安希子: Let me know what Birgit decides.

MightyDuck: I will.

安希子: Silly! I will IM you next weekend!

MightyDuck: OK!

安希子: Yes! Bye!
MightyDuck: Bye!

I minimized the IM client, finished checking hockey scores, and then went down to the Duck's Nest to relax until bedtime.

 Birgit

After Kjell and I finished in the sauna, we showered and then went to get a snack. I saw the door to what my moms called 'the Playroom' was closed and locked, which meant Dad was entertaining. Once we finished our snack, I excused myself and went to Dad's study, which I was allowed to do, and made a phone call.

"Libby speaking!" she said when she answered the phone.

"It's Birgit!" I exclaimed.

"Calling from your dad's phone, according to Caller ID!"

"You remember what we did with Tomás yesterday?"

"How could I forget! You're calling to set up another assignation?"

I giggled, "Yes, but not with Tomás. What do you think of Kjell?"

"Tall, blond, blue eyes, hunky, and Swedish? What's not to like?"

"Interested in giving him an experience he'll never forget tomorrow before he goes home on Saturday?"

Libby laughed, "You are a wild woman, Birgit Adams!"

"Right, because you are so tame and conventional! Show up around 1:00pm. I'll have Kjell in my room, just sitting on the loveseat. You just come in and start undressing!"

"I take it back! You're nuts!"

"We're teenagers! We're supposed to be incurably horny and having fun! I'm not ready for boring married sex yet!"

"Because your dad's sex life is boring!"

"I was teasing! See you tomorrow at 1:00pm!"

"See you!"

We said 'goodbye', I hung up, then went to the great room. I took Kjell's hand, and we went up to my room.



Steve

"When I cum, don't swallow; stand up and French kiss me," I said to Amy as she moved to her knees in the shower.

"No joke?"

"No joke! Think of it as an incentive!"

"Actually, now that I think a bit more about it, you stuck your tongue in my pussy after you came in it."

"And you kissed me willingly with your pussy juice on my tongue, lips, and face."

"Weird at first, but yeah!"

She grasped me, took me into her mouth, and sucked gently as she swirled her tongue around my glans. She'd had some practice as we'd engaged in sixty-nine, so the shower blowjob was very enjoyable. Amy bobbed, stroked, licked, and sucked until I blasted cum into her soft, warm mouth, then stood up and fiercely French kissed me.

"There's only one problem," she said as I began to lather her body after she finally broke the kiss.

"What's that?"

"Finding someone to do this with regularly!"

"Just make sure you are religious about your birth control pills, and you insist any partner you're with be tested."

"Kailey explained exactly why that's so important during that discussion."

"Good. When will you know if you can start school in the Fall?"

"March or April. Once I'm sure my parents' finances are in decent shape, I'll call the Registrar at the Conservatory."

"I have friends and family in Cincinnati. If you decide you want to work part-time, let me know, and I'll make a call or two."

"Thanks! I'll need some spending money because obviously I haven't been able to save anything for the past fifteen months, and what I'd saved before I gave to my parents."

"What's your long-term goal?"

"To be a rock star!" Amy said with a laugh. "I mean, it worked for Clarence Clemmons!"

"True! And your fallback?"

"A symphony chair or maybe just a jazz musician. We'll see when I graduate."

"I should put you in touch with my wife's half-sister, who is First Chair violin in the New York Symphony."

"What's her name?"

"Fawn Barton, professionally. Her married name is Haas. She attended Julliard."

"I tried but wasn't accepted."

"Cincinnati Conservatory is not a second-rate school by any stretch!"

"I know!"

I finished lathering Amy and helped her rinse off before she took the soap to return the favor.

"Did I meet your expectations?" I asked.

"Absolutely! You certainly seemed to enjoy yourself!"

"I most assuredly did!"



January 3, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

I had an early meeting on Friday at 550 West Jackson, so I parked next to Union Station. I considered stopping in the station and using a payphone to call Theo to let him know about the visit I'd had from the FBI, but I quickly rejected that idea, as if any phones were tapped, they'd be the phones at the union offices. As I walked, I considered my options and decided there were no good ones. Even having Kimmy schedule a meeting would attract unwanted attention.

Sending him an email wouldn't work, as NIKA archived literally every message for an extended time, and once I sent the email, I had no control over what happened to it. I hadn't ever used any spy craft with Theo, so there were no arranged chalk marks to indicate a meeting was necessary and no planned dead drop locations. Using the mail was out, as was any regular delivery service. What I really needed was a completely unrelated third party to carry the message.

It dawned on me that I had *exactly* that! I knew someone who could contact Theo, and the chances that it would be traced back to me were infinitesimal. I had

enough time, so I doubled back to the station, went to the pay phones in the great hall, and dropped in a quarter.

"Alfonso Gallucci," my contact said when he answered the phone.

"Alfonso, it's Steve Adams."

"Hey, Kid! Long time no hear! How are things."

"Very good. You?"

"Great! I'm a senior foreman now. I hear you're in business with Anthony."

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer!" I declared.

He laughed, "What do I owe the honor of the call, Don Stephen?"

"I need you to quietly and in person let Theo Lipari know that the Feds are snooping and his name came up. I strongly suspect his phones are tapped, and mine might be as well, so I'm calling from a payphone in Union Station."

"I can do that. Anything other than the Feds are snooping?"

"No. Given the circumstances, I don't think we should meet, so just let him know I'm still a stand-up guy. If you need to get in touch with me, just come down to the construction site and have someone let me know you're there."

"Got it."

We said 'goodbye', I hung up, then hurried on my way to 550 West Jackson for the project meeting with Alonzo.

 Jesse

As I had planned, I met Simone at the café on Hyde Park at 11:30am.

"Did you think more about the Valentine's Day party?" Simone asked once we had our food.

"Yes, and I'm not sure it will work, even acting on Luna's suggestion about inviting people to the Hangout."

"Why?"

"Because Illinois set the age of consent at seventeen," I replied. "One-on-one, I wouldn't worry about it, but a group fooling around, even if we didn't go all the way, could get us in serious trouble because Luna, Desiree, and Jack are all eighteen, and you're only fifteen."

"But we were all naked in the sauna together, and a bunch of the guys and girls were Sophomores, so they weren't seventeen."

"And that would be defensible because literally nothing happened, not even a kiss. OK, sure, some parents could complain, but we didn't do anything illegal. If we have a party where we play naked *Twister*, or whatever, that's a totally different thing."

"Nobody will narc on us!"

"Nobody has to narc," I countered. "All it would take is someone saying something to a friend. I just read an article in the newspaper about a fifteen-year-

old guy who was sleeping with his teacher. A girl who liked him somehow found out and complained. They arrested the teacher, who was hot, by the way."

"There is no way a Sophomore is going to feel abused by banging his hot teacher!"

"No kidding! But his parents are all over the news about how their poor baby was abused and robbed of his childhood and every other thing you can think of to play him as the victim."

"Why are grownups so dumb?" Simone complained.

"Ubiquitous birth control," I replied. "When having sex meant a significant risk of pregnancy, it put a natural damper on things because girls wouldn't risk it. Once the Pill was generally available, and you could buy rubbers anywhere, and abortion was made legal everywhere, those limits were off. That meant teens could screw as much as they wanted without much risk, so long as they used birth control.

"AIDS put a damper on that and also scared ignorant people who don't understand 'Safe Sex' or who object to ANY mention of it, though those sets of people overlap significantly. Also, people began viewing teenagers as little children, something that is an entirely new phenomenon that started around 1975 and intensified in the 1980s and is getting worse every day.

"My grandpa on my dad's side is twenty years older than my grandma, and they married when she was twenty-five. Nowadays, people flip out at that age difference. Not that long ago, a twenty-five-year-old guy marrying an eighteen-year-old girl would be considered not just OK but normal. Now you hear about 'a man wanting to marry a teenager', which implies that eighteen is still a kid."

"Where did you learn all that stuff?"

"At the Compound! My moms, my dad, and the rest of my family and friends talk about stuff like that, plus I read, too. The bottom line is, we could have a party, but it can't be like you want unless everyone is at least seventeen, or nobody is older than seventeen. I'm not sure my dad would be comfortable with a sex party for people under seventeen."

"I thought he was cool!"

"He *is* cool, but he has to be concerned about what the police and DCFS might say if they got wind of it somehow. My advice is to wait until you and your friends can meet in your college dorm. So long as everyone is eighteen, nothing too bad can happen to anyone."

"What do you mean 'too bad'."

"A university could kick you out if you broke some rule by doing that."

"The world is full of control freaks!"

"Yes, it is."



Steve

"Want to get lunch at West Loop Café?" Penny asked when we left the three-hour project meeting.

"Sure, though, after meetings like that, I need a double whisky!"

"I was ready to nod off after thirty minutes!" Penny declared. "Can't you put a stop to that?"

"You can complain to Dave, but I suspect he won't force a change given this was a project kickoff meeting for *NIKA Legal 2004*."

"I suppose the consolation is we've gone to a two-year major release cycle, so these meetings only happen once a year between the medical and legal software."

"True. And the two-year cycle makes sense, as customers were delaying upgrades because they came every year. Cindi also extended maintenance for previous releases to five years, so in theory, someone could skip two releases. And firms that want the leading edge can use the hosted system, which receives continual updates and doesn't require any local changes in their offices."

"I'm not sure I'd trust having all my data hosted," Penny observed as we walked into West Loop Café."

"Me, either," I replied as we sat down. "But plenty of small firms prefer it because they don't have to have local computer support except a PC guy they call when hardware breaks or somebody opens a virus. The solution is way less expensive for them than on-premise servers and licensing. The ones who pay through the nose are the ones who want all Windows gear, including servers."

"Serves 'em right! Now, if we could only get rid of *IE* and *MS Office*! *WordPerfect* is SO much better for law firms, but Microsoft has basically murdered it."

"Sadly."

A cute redheaded waitress came over to the table and took our drink orders.

"She was giving you the eye," Penny smirked. "Go for it!"

"Right, so you can give me grief about refusing YOUR advances?"

"If you weren't such a dope, you'd take me up on it!"

"It's precisely because I'm *NOT* a dope that I don't! You and Terry had enough trouble in the past that having an affair is the last thing you need."

"He'd give me a hall pass for you if I gave him one!"

"A bad idea, Pretty Penny."

"You're just no fun at all!"

"Uh-huh," I chuckled.

We perused the menus, and when the waitress returned, she put our drinks in front of us and flashed me a smile.

"What can I get you?"

"The Italian beef sandwich with chili fries," Penny said.

"And you?" she asked me.

"I don't see it on the menu, but you used to offer a chef's salad."

"Sorry, they changed the menu, so you can only get what's on the new menu."

I decided to tease Penny by flirting with the waitress, so I leaned down and put the menu on the floor next to her.

"Take a step to your left," I said with a grin.

The waitress laughed and, to my surprise, stepped onto the menu. She wrote on a fresh page on her pad, tore it off, and handed it to me. Penny rolled her eyes, and I folded the paper on which the waitress had written her name and number and put it in my pocket.

"I think I'll go with the pulled Cajun chicken sandwich and a side salad."

"No fries?" Shay, the waitress, asked.

"No thanks."

"I'll go put your orders in!"

She took Penny's menu, stepped back, picked up the menu from the floor, and went towards the kitchen.

"Unbelievable!" Penny said with a laugh. "Only you could get away with something that corny! Are you going to call her?"

"Red hair, green eyes, cute as a button? What do you think?"

"I think I wish I were your big toe; that's what I think!"

"My big toe?" I asked.

"So you could bang me on all the furniture!" Penny declared.

I laughed hard, attracting attention from the other tables.

"Cute, Penelope, cute!" I said when I finally stopped laughing.

"So, how about it?"

"You know the answer and why," I replied.

"You're just no fun, Steve! No fun at all!"

 Birgit

As planned, Kjell and I were cuddled on the loveseat in my room.

"Did you enjoy your visit?" I asked.

"Absolutely! I'm really looking forward to seeing you in Sweden. You have to come to Stockholm regularly!"

"That's the plan!"

"And I don't just mean to have sex because there's a lot to do. And if your host family is OK with it, maybe I could come to Göteborg because there's a lot to do there I haven't done."

"I'm positive Suzana will be OK with that. She was my dad's host sister when he was in Sweden, and Dad says she's totally cool. She and her husband, Karl, have a son, Henrik, who is ten, and a daughter, Lena, who is seven, and they have a nice house in Västra Frölunda. I want to skate at the rink where my dad skated and met Katt Sundström."

"You said you plan to go to the same «gymnasiet». Which one?"

"Schillerska," I replied. "The headmaster is one of my dad's old teachers, so I'm sure they'll accept me into N1a, the same course my dad was in."

I saw the clock change to 1:00pm, which meant Libby would arrive any second, and I totally wasn't surprised when, about fifteen seconds later, she walked into the room, locked the door, and began undressing.

Kjell looked shell-shocked, and his surprise only increased when I jumped up and began taking off my clothes.

"For real?" he asked.

"For real," I said. "Get undressed, and we'll give you a wonderful going away present!"

I'd never seen any boy undress so fast in my life!

 Jesse

"Are you going to be at the Hangout on the 19th?" I asked Simone as we left the café.

"Yes, though my main reason for showing up is basically shot."

"There's no reason we can't have a party, but the line would have to be drawn at keeping our clothes on except in the sauna and no fooling around in there. And games would need to be no more than R-rated."

"I am absolutely sure I'm not going to college in Chicago!" Simone declared.

"Florida State, here I come!"

I laughed, "The premier party school in the country, and in Florida to boot!"

"You're going to UW Madison, right?"

"That's the plan," I replied. "I'll take the SAT in March and the ACT in April. I want to apply and go for early acceptance because it's my number one school. Am I walking you home?"

"Can we hang out at your house until dinner?"

"Yes," I said, and we began walking in that direction.

"What if some other school offers you a scholarship?"

"I doubt I'll take it," I replied. "Honestly, as good as I am in the Chicago High School League, I don't think I can count on making the NHL, and I'd hate to spend a decade in the minors only never to have a chance. I aim to get a job in the front office or as a scout. I'll play club hockey at UW and see if I can help coach goalies for the NCAA team. I'm actually coaching this year at Summer hockey camp in Minnesota."

Saying that made me think about Scarlett and wonder how that might play out if she wasn't speaking to me. I wondered if she'd even take the job and suspected she might just go home instead. I wouldn't be bothered by being around her, but girls tended not to want anything to do with guys with whom they had broken up.

"How'd you land that?"

"I attended the camp last Summer, and they asked me to help coach the younger kids. I'll go for my two weeks, then hang out with some family friends for a weekend, and then spend two weeks coaching elementary school kids."

"Boys? Or boys and girls?"

"Mostly boys, but some girls. My best friend's girlfriend plays on her school team, and we had a girl on our team when I was a Freshman."

"But guys are so much bigger and stronger."

"Nicole is the fastest skater in the entire league, which really helps her, and Mia, who played when I was a Freshman, was tall and pretty strong. And they don't allow checking in our league, so it's not as big a deal as it would be in the NHL."

"Do you think girls should be allowed to play in the NHL?"

"If they're good enough to make the team, sure, but I doubt the insurance companies would go for it, given what you said about strength, which really is about body mass more than anything. That said, there's no reason a girl couldn't play goalie. Back in the late 90s, the Islanders invited Cammi Granato to training camp, but she turned them down. She was certainly good enough to play goalie in the NHL. Where it really would work is baseball, where there is no contact, and a fast singles-hitting female would have a great chance as a leadoff batter."

"I'm surprised you say that. My dad and brother are complete sexist pigs about stuff like that."

"I have two moms, a sister with a black belt, and two sisters with brown belts! I don't think I'd live long as a sexist pig!"

We reached the coach house, went around to the back door, which I unlocked, then went inside.

"Nobody's home?" Simone asked once we took off our coats, hats, gloves, and shoes.

"No. My moms are both at work. We can go downstairs to the rec room if you want."

"I'd rather we went to your bedroom!"

"That can only happen if you have an STI test."

Simone smiled, opened her purse, and then handed me an envelope. I opened it, saw that it was clean, and handed it back. I took her hand and led her towards the stairs.

"I'm on the Pill," she said.

That was music to my ears because I really, really preferred not to have to use rubbers.

XI. Dark Dreams

January 3, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! Simone gasped as I pushed into her very tight virgin tunnel after bringing her off twice with my mouth.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Yes!" she gasped. "Fuck me, Jesse! Fuck me hard!"

I did, and eleven minutes later, after she'd had a pair of strong orgasms, I groaned and pumped cum into her spasming pussy. When our orgasms passed, I stayed on top of her, both of us panting and sweaty from exertion, until I softened and slipped from her.

"How soon can you go again?"

"Less than ten minutes," I replied. "Faster with encouragement!"

Simone laughed softly, "Guys will do *anything* to get a girl to suck them!"

"There might be some truth to that," I chuckled. "But it's not necessary!"

I slid down a bit and sucked on each of her nipples for a short time, then moved down further so I could pleasure her orally, which always got me hard, though not quite as quickly as if the girl used her mouth. I brought her off once, and then, because I was fully erect, fucked her hard for a second time.

"Oh, God, Jesse!" she gasped when I came in her for the second time.

A third round followed, and then I led Simone to the shower, as she needed to be home in time for dinner."

"Can I ask you something?" Simone inquired as we moved under the spray.

"What?"

"Have you been with a black girl before?"

"Yes," I replied. "I don't discriminate! As a girl I used to date said, girls are all pink on the inside!"

Simone laughed, "Nice one! Would you marry a black girl?"

"I wouldn't ever rule anyone out simply based on their skin color," I said. "But that's a question for at least three years from now, if not longer! And you're only fifteen!"

"I didn't mean today! I was just curious. My brother would have a cow if he knew I'd fucked a white guy."

"So don't tell him!" I replied. "It's between you and me and nobody else."

"I won't! You made me feel *really* good, and I don't want to mess up a chance to do it again with you!"

"I think we can arrange that," I replied.

"Like a regular thing?" Simone asked as I soaped her boobs.

I almost laughed because I only needed one more girl to set up another «Filles du jour» situation.

"Mondays after school?" I asked.

"Yes! I'd LOVE to be fucked three times every Monday! Make me feel as good as you did today, and I might even suck you!"

"Only if you want to," I said. "Never do anything you don't want to do or aren't comfortable doing."

"I'm teasing! I just didn't want to do anything but fuck today! I really liked your tongue in my cooch, too!"

"I enjoy doing that," I said as I soaped her firm, sexy butt.

She rinsed off, then soaped me, and I rinsed off, then we got out of the shower. We dried off and dressed, then I walked her to the corner of the street where she lived because she didn't want her brother to be suspicious. I waited, and once she had gone inside, I returned home, changed the sheets on my bed, put the soiled ones in the washer, then went to the main house to hang out with Albert.

 Matthew

I was really worried about Maggie, so I called her mom let in the afternoon to check.

"We haven't heard anything," Mrs. Jones said. "We called everyone in drama, along with Mr. Fruits, and nobody's heard from her, not even Mark."

"What did the police say?"

"Not much. They're interviewing all her friends and the neighbors. I'm surprised they haven't been in touch with you."

"I'm actually in the city until Sunday," I said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Pray," Mrs. Jones said.

I suppressed a sigh because that was about as effective as making a wish when you blew out a candle.

"You'll call if you hear anything, right?"

"Yes. And you'll call if she gets in touch with you?"

"Absolutely!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"Nothing?" Chelsea asked.

"Nothing," I said.

 Steve

While I was driving home on Thursday evening, I considered if I should actually call Shaye. I'd put the menu on the floor as a lark, not expecting she'd move to stand on it. I felt I owed her a call, at least, as I would likely see her again at the

café. I also knew, given my history, what the likely outcome of a call to a cute Irish girl with red hair and freckles would be. It would also annoy the hell out of Penny, which was a major added bonus.

I wasn't sure what her hours were, but I decided it was worth calling. When I stopped at a light on Halsted, I put the phone on speaker and dialed the number on the piece of paper Shaye had given me. She answered on the second ring.

"This is Shaye!"

"This is Steve," I said. "I was calling about something on the menu that looked delicious!"

She laughed, "I swear, that was the worst pickup line ever!"

"And yet..." I chuckled.

"It was so bad it was good!" Shaye said mirthfully. "I take it the blonde isn't your girlfriend?"

"Not for almost twenty years," I replied. "She works for me."

"Your ex-girlfriend works for you? That's a bit strange!"

"That barely scratches the surface of the strangeness that is my world! Are you a student or working full time?"

"Student at the School of the Art Institute. I waitress for spending money. I assume you're a manager or owner of a company?"

"Software engineer and majority owner of my company," I replied. "What's your major?"

"Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting, with an art education minor," she replied.

"What I saw on the menu looked delicious. Any chance you're free for lunch or coffee on Monday?"

Shaye laughed softly, and I could almost hear her shaking her head.

"Classes don't start until the 21st," she said, "so I'm working during the day. My shift ends at 4:00pm. Starbucks at 4:30pm?"

"Caribou is better. There's one across from 550 West Jackson."

"I'll see you there!"

We said 'goodbye', and I snapped the phone shut to disconnect the call. I arrived home about ten minutes later and spent about forty minutes before dinner with my wives.

"Any idea when you'll be home tonight?" Kara asked as we relaxed in the Indian room after dinner.

"I suppose it really depends on how long her first fantasy takes," I replied. "Her parents' house is in Naperville, so assuming the fantasy goes the way I expect, figure ninety minutes total for driving and about forty-five minutes at her parents' house. But again, it depends on what exactly she wants in the bondage fantasy."

"She didn't tell you?"

"No, other than she expressly said it's not a rape fantasy and that she'll tell me what she wants me to do, so it's clear that it's consensual and not about force."

"Bondage is a paraphilia," Jessica observed. "It doesn't have to be about force or pain, simply getting off on being immobilized. May I speculate?"

"Sure."

"She expressed fear about her babysitter seduction fantasy, right?"

"Yes. She wanted to do it and was tempted when she was fifteen and sixteen, but said she chickened out."

"Maybe that has something to do with it, though you also said she seemed very confident."

"She did. I didn't sense any hesitation at all."

"Then I'd speculate it's a desire to be overpowered," Jessica said. "You said she's had the fantasy for a long time, right?"

"From age thirteen to twenty. She said the idea just popped into her head one day."

"I wonder if she read something or saw something that triggered it," Suzanne suggested. "Maybe on a TV Soap? Or one of the Prime Time dramas?"

"I remember an episode of *Dallas* where Lucy Ewing was kidnapped and tied up," Jessica said, but that was when I was an undergrad, but that means it was twenty years ago."

"My mom watched *Days of Our Lives* and Jennifer Horton was kidnapped and tied up," Suzanne said. "I think the timing fits because it was about seven years ago."

"Your mom, huh?" I chuckled.

"She'd tape it and watch while she made dinner. I saw probably half the episodes but didn't pay all that much attention."

"And yet, you knew the girl's name!" I teased.

"What-ever!" Suzanne exclaimed, doing a very good impression of Birgit. "But the timing is exactly right. I'm pretty sure she was rescued before she could be assaulted, but the threat was there. If I remember, the kidnapper was trying to seduce her into consent, but as I said, I didn't pay that close attention. I do remember she wasn't tied spread-eagled, just her hands were cuffed to the bed."

The doorbell rang, interrupting the conversation, and I went to answer it.

 Birgit

"When will you apply to the exchange program?" Tiffany asked as she, Hannah, Naomi, Kjell, Jesse, and I walked to Giordano's to meet our friends.

"At the start of the next school year," I said. "They start taking applications in September for the following school year."

"And you'll really be gone for an entire year?" Hannah asked.

"Yes! You'll live!"

"I'm hosting a party for Birgit's trip the day *after* she leaves!" Jesse declared, causing all the others to laugh.

"What-ever!" I growled.

"«Varför låter du honom störa dig?»" Kjell asked. ("Why do you let him get to you?")

"«Jag vet; Jag vet!»" I replied. ("I know; I know!")

"Must be nice to have a secret code!" Naomi declared.

"It is," I giggled, "and it also means Dad doesn't have a secret code with his Swedish friends!"

"Maybe I should learn Russian," Jesse said. "But Larisa actually doesn't use it except with her parents, and they always speak English when anyone else is around."

"She's gorgeous," Kjell said.

"And what am I?" I demanded. "Chopped liver?!"

My three friends all laughed.

"Wow, insecure much, Sis?!" Jesse teased.

"Oh, shut up!" I retorted.

"«Du vet mycket väl att jag tycker att du är snygg»,»" Kjell said. ("You know very well that I think you're pretty!")

"«Ja, jag vet det,»" I admitted. "«Jag bara retade faktiskt.»" ("Yes, I know. I was actually only teasing.")

"«Är nåt fel?»" ("Is something wrong?")

«Nej inte direkt. Jag är bara...jag vet inte...på dåligt humör, antar jag.» ("No, not really. I'm just...I don't know...in a bad mood, I guess.")

"«Har du mens?»? Kjell asked, surprising me. ("Do you have your period?")

"«Ja. Hur vet du det?»" ("Yes, how did you know?")

"«Min flickkompisar in Sverige blir riktigt sura när de har mens. Det är helt normal, tror jag»" ("My female friends become crabby when they have their periods. It's normal, I think.")

"«Det är det.»" ("It is.")

"«Jag blir inte upprörd om du inte vill älska senare. Men jag är inte heller rädd för lite blod!»" ("I won't be upset if we don't fool around later. But I'm also not afraid of a bit of blood!")

I giggled, "«Det får vi se!»" ("We'll see!")

"Enough!" Tiffany exclaimed. "What are you two saying?"

"Wouldn't YOU like to know?" I giggled. "It's between Kjell and me."

I'd been annoyed that I might not get to fool around with Kjell again before he left, but it appeared he was going to be *up* for it, which made me happy. Weirdly, orgasms reduced the cramps and the bloated feeling, and I would have felt totally wrong using my 'personal massager' with Kjell in bed with me.

We arrived at Giordano's and joined a group of our friends at two large round tables.

 Steve

When I opened the door, I was surprised.

"Mr. Adams?" a man who I guessed was about my age asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Jamaal Rahim, Zahra's father. I don't know if you remember me from the marriage of Hassan and Aisyah?"

"I'm sorry, but no, I don't."

"I understand. It was a busy day for you. Do you have a moment to speak?"

I didn't, really, as I was expecting Nadia momentarily. That said, there was no way I could put him off, given I knew his daughter been coming to Jesse's hockey games regularly, and they usually had lunch afterwards.

"Yes, of course. Come in, please."

He came in, took off his coat, hat, gloves, and shoes, and followed me to my study with a quick stop to let my wives know.

"May I offer you a soft drink or tea?" I asked.

"Tea would be good."

"I'll be right back," I said. "Please have a seat."

I went to the kitchen, put loose tea into a strainer, set it in a pot, then poured hot water from the kettle over it. I put it on a tray, along with two cups, sugar, and lemon, then returned to the study.

"It will need a few minutes to steep," I said, sitting down in a chair next to his. "What can I do for you?"

"Amir Khan spoke very highly of you and how you helped his family."

"He's a very good man," I replied. "It was unfortunate that my daughter and I could not attend Fatimah's wedding."

Not that Birgit had any desire to visit Saudi Arabia, given their treatment of women.

"Are you aware my daughter has been at your son's hockey matches?" Jamaal asked.

I nodded, "Yes, I have. She's often there with one or two other friends."

"I plan to come with her a week from tomorrow to see the game if that's OK."

"Of course it is," I replied. "I know Zahra's at the Lab School with Birgit, but there are no rules about who can come to the Kenwood Academy games."

"Good. I didn't want to simply show up, as I don't know the protocol."

"May I ask where you're from?"

"Syria. We emigrated about six years ago. My father was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and our family was always under suspicion, but eventually, my wife, son, and daughter were allowed to leave. I renounce violence as a political solution."

I smiled, "I wasn't worried."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't be if you were friends with Amir and know Imam Iqbal."

I heard the doorbell ring, but someone else would have to answer it, as I didn't want to give any offense. I poured the tea and handed a cup to Jamaal. He added sugar, which didn't surprise me, while I drank mine neat.

"Thank you," he said, then sipped some of the tea.

"You're welcome."

"What I wanted to speak to you about is that my wife believes my daughter is interested in your son. I think you know the problem, right?"

Oh, I knew what his problem would be if what I suspected to be true actually was, but that wasn't what he meant.

"According to your faith, a young woman could only marry a devout Muslim man, and Jesse is a practicing Christian. In addition, you would likely prefer your daughter did not date, at least in the American way."

"Amir said you understood."

"I do, though I also believe that it would be up to Jesse and Zahra, not me. I completely understand that you don't agree, and that's fine."

"He seems like an upstanding young man from everything I have heard -- good grades, a star athlete, and very polite. Would you object to him speaking with an Imam?"

"I've spoken with Imam Iqbal at the mosque in Bridgeview you attend," I said. "He's a good man. I would have no problem with Jesse speaking with him. That said, I wouldn't expect the conversation to be any more successful than those I had with Imam Iqbal or Imam Ibrahim Shehab in Los Angeles. You are, of course, free to ask Jesse."

"You understand that if he's unwilling, nothing could come of their friendship, right?"

"I understand your perspective and respect your views, but Jesse is almost seventeen and has to make up his own mind on the matter. I am absolutely positive Jesse will respect Zahra's wishes; therefore, so long as you've clearly communicated your faith and your perspective to her, I don't believe there will be a problem. I hope that won't affect Zahra studying with Birgit and her other friends, including Zaida."

"Zaida is a wonderful and devout young woman, and I think the two girls will watch out for each other. I've made some allowances for American culture, but a romantic relationship with a non-Muslim is simply unacceptable."

"Amir and I had a number of conversations about that," I said, "and I know Fatimah and Birgit had them as well. Even if we don't agree, we respect your views. I'd welcome you as a friend, and I'll extend an offer to join our weekly gatherings, though when we gather here, we drink and gamble, and when we gather for breakfast, most of the men eat bacon or pork sausage. That said, if you'll accept an invitation to dinner, I'll ensure that it's «halal»."

"I'm not as conservative as Amir," he said with a smile. "Let me think about it, please."

"Yes, of course. You know where the game is next Saturday, right?"

"I do," he replied. "I will see you there."

He finished his tea, I walked him to the door, and once he'd put on his Winter gear, we shook hands.

"«As-salāmu ‘alaykum», Jamaal Rahim," I said. ("Peace be unto you.")

"«Wa ‘alaykumu s-salām», Steve Adams," he replied. ("And peace be unto you, too.")

He left, and I went to the Indian Room to see a beautiful girl with an athletic build and long black hair sitting and laughing with my wives.

"Is everything OK?" Kara asked.

"Oh, just the usual Friday night at the Compound," I chuckled. "A Muslim dad ensuring I understood his views."

"Jesse?"

"Who else? Two of the boys are spoken for, and Michael is happy to have a close female friend but has zero interest in a girlfriend at the moment."

"Something specific?" Suzanne asked.

"I believe he's noticed that his daughter likes Jesse!" I said with a grin.

All three of my wives laughed.

"Like father, like son!"

"Are the three of you done interrogating Nadia?" I asked with a smirk.

"We were just getting to know her!" Jessica declared. "But I suppose we'll let you take her away."

Nadia got up, I took her hand, led her to my study, and indicated she should sit in one of the leather wingback chairs.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"And you!"

"I'm sorry for the delay. I had an unexpected visitor."

"It's OK. Your wives are awesome!"

"I sure think so! Mind if I ask a question?"

"What?"

"I know you said the idea of how to lose your virginity just popped into your mind around age thirteen, but I was wondering if something had triggered it. You know, a movie, a TV show, or a book? Maybe you saw someone tied up?"

"I honestly don't remember seeing anything like that, but I suppose it's possible. Is it really that important?"

"No, but I wondered what might be behind your desire. I've engaged in a bit of bondage play, but it was always after I'd known the person for some time, and there was a level of trust. I suppose it concerns me that you'd ask a complete stranger to tie you up for your first time."

"Did you change your mind?" Nadia asked.

"No, but let me ask about your fantasy, how you want to be tied up, and what you want me to do."

"Danielle indicated you could go a long time and at least three or four times in a couple of hours."

"That would be accurate."

"I want you to tie me tightly to the bed and take my virginity. After that, lick me, fuck me, and cum in my pussy or mouth as many times as you can before we have to leave for the other fantasy."

"May I make an observation?"

"What?"

"That your first fantasy seriously detracts from playing the shy, demure, virginal babysitter."

Nadia frowned, "I think you really don't want to fulfill my main fantasy. I think you'd do it because you promised, but you're uncomfortable, even though it's not about violence, and it's totally consensual. And because of that, you won't really put your heart into it. I think I've made a mistake."

"If there was a mistake, it's on me. What would you like to do? I'll leave it totally in your hands."

"I think I'll just go home," Nadia said.

"OK. I'm very sorry. Do you want me to give you a lift to the station, or should I call a cab?"

"A cab, please."

I called a cab for her, then walked her to the foyer, where she put on her coat, hat, gloves, and shoes. Once she was bundled up, we went out onto the porch to wait for the cab, which showed up about two minutes later. She got in, I handed the driver double what I estimated the fare would be, then shut the door. Once the cab pulled away, I went back inside and joined my wives.

"What happened?!" Kara asked.

"Me, not her. I tried to talk with her, and all I did was succeed in convincing her my heart wasn't really in it. I'd say she wasn't wrong. I should have stuck to my first instinct and simply declined the bondage fantasy."

"But not the babysitter one?"

"That one I could totally get into!" I chuckled. "I did point out that doing things the way she wanted kind of spoiled the whole 'shy, demure, virginal babysitter' fantasy. I think it convinced me that my decision that referrals are basically out was the right one."

"You had fun with Amelia."

"I did, and, as Jennifer constantly reminds me, there are exceptions to every rule. And when it comes right down to it, the way things developed with Emma was perfect."

"I'm curious, but is she a long-term girlfriend?"

"I seriously doubt it," I replied. "She wants a mentor and made the point about working for NIKA. That limits how long it could go on and how public it could be. And she asked how it would work if she dated, so I'd say she's already decided against a role similar to Natalie's or Yuriko's."

"Another one you have to hide from Liz?" Jessica asked.

"I totally understand the point Liz made, but just as with both previous cases, Emma asked after we'd been together, and it seems wrong to punish them when they didn't know the rule."

"You mean Estrella and Cecily, right?" Suzanne asked. "And to some extent, Penny, but she started long before Liz joined NIKA."

"Yes. And it's especially true when I have nothing to do with hiring, with the exception of a C-level position that might be open."

"What are the chances of *that*?" Jessica asked.

"Effectively zero," I replied. "Barring some Loki-initiated event which I don't care to contemplate!"

"What did your guest want?"

"To discuss Jesse's relationship with his daughter. He's not as conservative as Amir Khan, but he's still a Muslim."

"NOBODY is as conservative as Amir Khan!" Kara declared. "Did he forbid them from seeing each other?"

"No, but that might be the end result when he requests Jesse speak with Imam Iqbal!"

"Seriously?" Kara asked. "He wants Jesse to convert?!"

"If I can read between the lines, Zahra has let her mother know she likes Jesse, and Mrs. Rahim talked to her husband, who came to talk to me. That is standard protocol for Muslims. Mr. Rahim knows Zahra has been going to Jesse's hockey games and goes out with the group on Friday nights. He made the point that he permits it because Zaida is with Zahra, and Birgit has said Zahra and Zaida always wear their scarves, which is why he allows Zahra a bit of freedom. He made the point of some deference to American culture, at least as far as he could go as a Muslim."

"Are Jesse and Zahra..." Suzanne asked.

"I have no knowledge and don't want any," I replied. "Plausible deniability and all that."

"What did you tell him?" Jessica asked.

"That he was free to suggest it to Jesse, but I felt it was a lost cause, so to speak. I suspect Zahra will have some restrictions added if things go the way I expect they will with Jesse. Do any of you know if Jen and Josie are home?"

"I'm pretty sure they went out," Kara said. "Josie's car isn't in the alley."

"OK. I want to let them know. I think I'll call Jesse now, though."

I pulled my mobile phone from my pocket and pressed the correct SpeedDial button.

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I said when I answered my phone as we were just walking into the theatre to see *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.

"Jesse, it's Dad, which I'm sure you know from Caller ID!"

"What's up, Pops?"

"I just had a visit from Jamaal Rahim, Zahra's dad."

I suppressed a groan.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"Not yet," Dad replied. "He appears to have become aware that Zahra likes you. He came to talk to me about asking you to speak to Imam Iqbal."

"Talk about skipping to the end!" I exclaimed.

"My take is that he'd permit you to court Zahra if you converted."

"Seriously? I thought he wasn't anywhere near as conservative as Mr. Khan!"

"He's not, or she wouldn't be allowed to hang out with you. Is she with you tonight?"

"Yes, and she and Zaida had special permission to stay out an extra hour so we could see the movie because it's three hours long. Mr. Rahim didn't tell you?"

"I was very careful in how I responded. My knowledge of your relationship is limited to knowing she goes out with the group on Friday nights and comes to your hockey games on Saturdays. Well, and she studies with Birgit. I don't want to know more for obvious reasons."

"Plausible deniability!" I declared.

"Exactly," Dad agreed. "I won't keep you; I just wanted to give you a heads-up."

"Thanks."

We said 'goodbye', and I disconnected the call by closing my phone. We bought our tickets, and then I took Zahra aside.

"Did you know your dad was going to talk to my dad?" I asked.

"No! He did?"

"My dad said your dad came to see him to talk about us! Your dad wants me to speak to your Imam."

Zahra laughed softly, "I want you to speak to the Imam, but we've discussed it, so I know you aren't interested in converting."

"How did your dad find out?"

"You mean that I like you? It has to be my mom. She asked me directly a few days ago. I admitted I liked you, but I said you were a Christian, so there wasn't any chance of being with you."

"What will happen when I refuse?"

"He will tell me that no matter how much I like you, and no matter how nice and respectful you are, I couldn't marry you because you weren't a Muslim. And that would mean, in his mind, not seeing each other romantically."

"So then what?"

"Then I keep removing my scarf for you! I'm not about to tell him! Are you?"

"Hell no!"

"I really like you, Jesse. A lot. But I'm also realistic."

"And your dad won't stop you from going out with the group?"

"No. So long as Zaida is with me, he's satisfied that we'll keep each other out of trouble. And he won't stop me from doing homework with Birgit, either."

"Good. Then let's go see the movie!"

We rejoined the others then entered the theatre.



January 4, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I'm glad you came to visit," I said to Kjell in Swedish as he packed on Saturday morning.

"Me, too! I wish you could visit during the summer, but I know you're busy with going to Japan and seeing your friend Katy."

"I'll talk to Dad about visiting, but I'm not sure it will be possible before I travel to Sweden as an exchange student."

"June 2004, right?"

"Yes. If things work the same way they did for Dad, I'll have about ten days before I have to go to the orientation, which is two weeks long. I'll make sure that Suzana knows I'll stay the first night in Stockholm with you, assuming I can manage it. Dad said they give you train tickets, and then your host family meets you when you get off the train, so we could probably manage. But we can worry about that sixteen months from now."

"Uhm, what are you going to do with those towels?"

"Wash them! I used old ones on purpose, so if the blood doesn't come out, I can just toss them."

"I can't believe how messy that was!" Kjell declared.

"But it was worth it, right?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Do I look like a «jävla idiot»?" he asked with a grin.

"Well, being a boy and all..." I teased.

"Uh huh," he said flatly. "School starts Monday for you, right?"

"Yes. You too, right?"

"Yes. Who's driving me to the airport? Your dad?"

"No. He has his men's breakfast, and Jesse and Albert are going with him. Mom will drive you."

"Which one?"

"My mom, the one who had me."

"I need a programme like they sell at football matches!"

"Well, you did score repeatedly!" I giggled.

"I'm all packed."

"Then let's go find Mom because it's almost time to leave."



Steve

"Did you talk to Zahra last night?" I asked Jesse when he and Albert got into the car with me on Saturday morning so they could join me at breakfast with the men.

"Yes. Mom One said you talked to her last night when she came home. I think all I can do is say 'no, thank you' to Mr. Rahim and see what happens. Hopefully, he won't keep Zahra from going out with the gang."

"I hope so, too, but Mussa was very liberal for a Muslim, and he objected to Adi seeing you, right?"

"Yes," Jesse replied. "I still talk to her at school, but she's not allowed to go out with the group. I let her know there were two other Muslim girls, but that didn't change her dad's mind. I'm afraid Mr. Rahim will react the same way. He doesn't seem as bad as Mr. Khan, but it's only a matter of degree."

"Not to stick my nose in," Albert said, "but you'd let religion get in the way of a girl you loved?"

"Well, in this case, it's more her dad is letting it get in the way," Jesse said. "And to some extent, so is she because she thinks she has to marry a Muslim. I don't think I have to marry an Orthodox girl, but I would like someone who would go to church with me."

"Nothing personal," Albert said, "but I can think of a hundred things I'd rather do on Sunday morning than spend four hours in church!"

"And you both have to make your own way in that regard," I said. "Just as I do, and my wives do, and your siblings and the cousins do. Spirituality is very personal, and we do our best as parents to allow you to decide for yourselves. Jesse is the only one who's a believer; the rest of us are agnostic or atheist. You don't talk about it much, Albert, so I can't say for sure what you think."

"I agree with Grandpa A -- there is literally no evidence for any gods, and I don't believe there ever can be. Obviously, Jesse disagrees, and I love him as my brother, but in the end, science has to win."

"I agree," Jesse said with a grin. "It answers 'What?', 'Where?', 'When?', and 'How?' questions. It cannot ever answer 'Why?' question, and I think 'because of physical laws' is completely unsatisfying. It basically boils down to 'because it is'."

"That's not what science says."

"Yeah?" Jesse countered. "Explain the time before the singularity and the conditions that caused everything to form out of nothing!"

"Just because we don't understand it now doesn't mean we never will," Albert countered. "Think how far we've come from the Babylonians, Greeks, and Egyptians."

"It's a trap!" I chuckled. "Given time and matter both came into existence with the 'Big Bang', there can be no 'before', at least in any sense that we could comprehend, and even if we take it as a given that there was a 'before', no information could be transmitted from that 'before', whatever that even means in that regard! In the end, I come down on the agnostic side because I cannot say definitively there is no god or gods."

"I get the whole 'you cannot prove a negative' bit," Albert said. "But I'm not asserting the existence. I'm denying your null hypothesis that 'some god might exist'. It's contingent on you to prove your hypothesis, not for me to refute it. Now, if you could provide empirical evidence or a repeatable test, then I'd be happy to examine the evidence or reproduce the test results! Until that point, it's just wishful thinking!"

"Let's assume that's true," Jesse said. "Some of us need to know 'why?'. I think that's what drives Dad."

"It is," I acknowledged.

"Yes,' Albert agreed, "but all of THAT is the result of electrochemical reactions that create the endorphins that make you feel good about something."

I chuckled, "You've been speaking to Elizabeth, haven't you?"

"Yes. She's a physicist like Neil and like Grandma Belinda was."

"Did Elizabeth happen to mention how Ben completely disarmed her?"

"No."

"We had a debate similar to this one during Philosophy Club; well, it was a Rap Session back then. Elizabeth was making the exact same points you were, and Trish and I were making the points Jesse and I are. Ben asked Elizabeth why she loved him and Shoshana. Elizabeth accused us of fighting dirty because she knew she'd hurt her husband and daughter emotionally if she insisted that love was a meaningless chemical reaction. And guess what? I bet you anything you care to wager, you wouldn't say that to your Yorkie lass!"

"My parents didn't raise any idiots!" Albert declared. "Well, I do have sisters, so we have to make allowances for levels of being an idiot!"

Jesse and I both laughed.

"In the end, though," Albert continued. "meaning is simply trying to put an anthropomorphic imprint on the universe, when, in the end, we're all simply made of star stuff."

"Thank you, Carl Sagan!" Jesse chuckled.

"He's not wrong!" Albert declared.

"On that, I agree," I said. "In his foreword to *A Brief History of Time*, on the other hand, he *is* wrong, as he commits numerous logical fallacies to try to assert something that Hawking did not -- that it is literally impossible for any gods to exist. I'm not saying believing what Sagan does is wrong, but that is *not* what Hawking was saying, and isn't something that can be logically proven from the principles of quantum mechanics."

"What does Jane think?" Jesse asked.

"Well, she's Jewish, but not so that you would notice except for a very annoying objection to bacon, which, if any god were to actually exist, would be considered ambrosia!"

"AMEN!" Jesse and I declared simultaneously.

"Or," Albert smirked, "as I like to call it when Stephie is around -- 'smoked, salted dead pig'!"

Jesse grinned. "Bacon tastes goood. Pork chops taste goood."

"Things didn't work out too well for the guy who said that!" I observed. "Shot to death in the john with his own suppressed MAC-10!"

"Correction," Albert said. "The firearm belonged to Marsellus Wallace, who left it there when he went to get breakfast for himself and Vincent."

"I stand corrected," I replied. "You're right."

"Remember those words, Dad!" Albert declared.

"I will, so long as you remember not to make any high-speed passes over air control towers or any admiral's daughters!"

"I feel the need...the need for speed!" Albert declared.

"Don't worry, Dad," Jesse interjected. "His Yorkie will hang him from a yardarm if he does the latter!"

"Albert, does the Navy still hang people from Yardarms?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he replied with a grin I saw in the rearview mirror.

"Jesse, Albert doesn't think the Navy hangs people from yardarms anymore," I said.

All three of us laughed at the sequence from *A Few Good Men*, and I very much appreciated the fact that my boys enjoyed 'Darmok', though Matthew was the absolute best at it because of his participation in Drama Club.

"On the way home, we have to make a stop in the Loop," I continued. "I need to pick up Emma because she's attending karate classes today."

"Shocking," Jesse deadpanned.

"Yeah, yeah," I chuckled. "Is it OK to ask what happened with Scarlett? Mom One simply said you guys had a disagreement."

"She objected to our family saunas," I replied. "And despite trying to discuss it with her and telling her about the varied rules we've used in the past, she decided to make it a bright line, and when I refused to give beyond the 'Weekend Rules', and said she shouldn't participate if she didn't want to, she decided to go home. In the end, it was going to be something where we couldn't compromise,

as that would mean not even participating in our family saunas. I'm not signing up for that."

"Some people simply need time to get used to the idea," I said. "But there are also plenty of people, probably a sizable majority, who would say it was wrong no matter what."

"In *this* country," Jesse said. "Not in Sweden, or in Finland, according to Eugen's stepdad Jaako. And there are co-ed *banyas* in Russia, and I'm sure other places in Europe! And topless beaches."

"Topless sunbathing is common in Europe," I said. "I saw that many times when I was traveling, and not just at the beach. You know my opinion of American views on that topic."

"Clueless prudes!" Jesse declared.

We arrived in Bucktown, we parked, and the three of us headed into Bucktown Bistro, where we were greeted by Alex and Sam, then sat down with the men who had arrived before us. A few minutes later, Matthew joined us as well.

XII. It's Up to You

January 4, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"How much do your kids know?" Emma asked once we'd arrived at the Compound after breakfast on Saturday.

"We don't hide anything, but we don't advertise, either. I simply let them know I needed to pick you up so you could attend karate classes today."

"But from their looks, I could tell they assumed we were going to sleep together."

"Unless you're tired, I doubt we'll do any sleeping!" I teased.

Emma laughed, "Euphemistically, you dope!"

"And to think she hasn't even spoken to Penny yet!" Kara said, coming to greet us with Suzanne right behind her.

"Hi, Kara; Hi, Suzanne!" Emma exclaimed. "Who's Penny?"

"She works for my company, and we share an office," I replied. "Her favorite word for me is 'dope'."

"Steve left out the torrid affair they had when he was twenty-one, and she was fifteen!" Suzanne interjected. "Though they quit because Penny wanted to work for Steve's company."

"Interesting parallel," Emma said. "Though Steve is a bit older than twenty-one!"

"A bit," I chuckled. "Kara, what time are you and Birgit leaving for O'Hare?"

"In about ten minutes. I spoke to Sensei Will, so he knows not to expect us. We're taking Jessica's BMW so you can have the SUV to drive to the dojo if you want."

"I think we'll walk and change at the dojo. Suzane, would you let the girls know? I need to get my gi."

Ten minutes later, Suzanne, Stephanie, Ashley, Emma, and I were walking south on Woodlawn Avenue towards Hyde Park Avenue.

 Matthew

"Matthew Adams?" a voice said when I answered the phone after arriving home from breakfast with Dad, my brothers, and the men.

"Yes," I replied.

"This is Detective Andrews with the Aurora Police Department. Do you have a moment to talk to me about Maggie Jones?"

I knew Dad's advice was to always lawyer up when speaking to the police, but I had zero concern because I hadn't done anything wrong, and I wanted them to find Maggie.

"Yes," I replied.

"When's the last time you saw or spoke with her?"

"Before Christmas," I replied. "Once school was out, I didn't see her. I went to Ohio to visit my aunt and some friends during Christmas break. Maggie was supposed to be at a New Year's Eve party, but she didn't show up."

"How was she the last time you saw her?"

"Out of sorts," I said.

"Do you know why?"

I did, but there was no way I was going to tell the cop that it was because Maggie wanted to sleep with me!

"She broke up with her boyfriend, and she's been interested in me, but I have a girlfriend, and I think that bothered her."

"You're in the same grade, right?"

"Yes."

"Were you ever romantically involved with Maggie?"

"No. We're both in drama and had some stage kisses, but I had permission from my girlfriend!"

The detective laughed, "Wise! Even those theatre kisses can bother girlfriends. I had the same problem in High School when I had to kiss my girlfriend's best friend on stage."

"Oops."

"More than you know. She's my wife now."

"Double oops."

"Yeah, let's just say it was not a good situation. Do you know where Maggie might go? Any friends or relatives?"

"Not beyond the kids who are in drama, and her mom said you were talking to everyone."

"We are, but we have to ask. Is there anything else you can tell me that you think might help?"

"Not really," I replied. "If she calls me or I see her, I'll call her mom."

"Please call me, too. Let me give you my number."

I did, he thanked me, and then hung up.

"I'm really worried," I said to Chelsea.

"Me, too," Chelsea said. "What do you think?"

"I have no clue. All we can do is wait."



Jesse

My phone rang just before 10:00am on Saturday. I looked at the display and thought about letting the call go to voicemail, but I decided that it was better to take the call.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi, it's Scarlett. Could we talk?"

"Yes," I replied. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Us. What happened."

I didn't see any way forward unless she was willing to compromise about the sauna. And it wasn't really the sauna, per se, but an approach to life. Given her thinking, I strongly suspected our parenting styles and approach to teen sexuality would diverge, and that would create no end of tension. While I didn't think we had to be completely in sync, we had to be close. In the end, that was what had wrecked my dad's relationship with Bethany -- they had diverging views on important topics. And all of that was on top of me not being anywhere near ready to make any lifetime commitments to anyone.

"What happened," I said carefully, "was a basic philosophical difference. The sauna was a symptom, if you will, of divergent worldviews."

"You sound so much more like my professors than my friends," she said. "It's like a whole different level."

"I think that's part and parcel of our worldview. My moms, my dad, his wives, my siblings, and our family's closest friends all have a very similar worldview. You met my siblings and some friends, and you heard the conversations. That's my world, and it's one I'm very comfortable in. Many people aren't, and those people tend not to be close friends and, in some cases, actually avoid us.

"That's what I believe happened when you were here. You weren't comfortable with our lifestyle, which is a product of our worldview and something that, in

the end, isn't going to change significantly. There is ridiculous pressure from puritanical elements of society, but we intend to resist tooth and nail. The saunas are simply an expression of that worldview, as are my moms' marriage, my dad's marriage, and so on."

"So you're saying, in effect, 'deal with it'?"

"I can't change who I am," I replied. "And I certainly don't want to be fitted for a straitjacket!"

"Are you trying to say you would want complete freedom to do whatever you wanted?"

"There's a difference between me freely deciding to do something and being forced to do it. When I marry, I intend, as I told you when you were here, that it is to be for life and with a single girl. My dad's lifestyle is fine for him, but I think the way my moms do it is better. But that's *my* choice. If I did want a situation like my dad's, that would also be *my* choice, and I would need to find girls who would accept that. Do you see the difference between being *fitted* for a straitjacket and making choices?"

"Yes. I guess I just never thought about things as deeply as you have. I never was exposed to anything like that in High School or even in college, with the exception of one philosophy class, and it didn't go anywhere near as deep because it was an intro class, so mostly a survey."

"At the risk of sounding nasty, may I point out that you didn't have a problem with being in the sauna with Matthew and Chelsea when you were here last year?"

"OK, sure, but that's different from being with twenty guys, or with your dad, or whoever, or you being in there with your sisters or moms. Can't you see that?"

"I can see that you object, yes, but I don't see a difference. Do you remember what I said about nudity and sex?"

"That nudity doesn't imply sex, but getting naked in front of a guy pretty much implies that, at least in my experience. Well, minus that one sauna."

"I need to be a bit uncouth," I said. "Besides me and maybe a doctor, how many guys have you been naked in front of?"

"Er, just Matthew."

"So, then, in *your* experience, it's 50/50. You can't draw any conclusions from that."

"Oh, give me a break! You know as well as I do girls only get naked if they want to have sex!"

"No, I don't know that at all! In fact, I've been in the sauna with dozens of girls with whom I haven't had sex and don't want to. Or do you think I have some weird Oedipus complex or want to sleep with my sisters?"

"No," Scarlett replied. "But...never mind. You have an answer for everything."

"Because I've *lived* it for almost seventeen years. Do you think your objections are new? Or that we've never had to deal with them? Not to mention our Hangouts, which are like college philosophy seminars."

"You don't have to be a jerk about it!"

"I did warn you I was going to be uncouth and possibly sound nasty, but I don't mean it to be nasty. I'm just telling it like it is. There's no point in hiding it or

trying to pretend I'm anything other than I actually am. I like you, Scarlett, a lot, but we have a serious compatibility problem."

"And you won't compromise?"

"On my worldview? No. And I think the sauna is really just the tip of the iceberg."

"How so?"

"Because it's a strong indicator that we won't have the same approach to childrearing, how we relate to friends, what we consider socially acceptable, and so on."

"And your church approves?"

"Most decidedly not," I replied. "But I don't have to agree with their teaching on anything that isn't expressly dogmatic. So, I keep my mouth shut on things with which I disagree and worship God in a way that satisfies my spiritual needs. Nobody can do anything else, and nobody is going to agree one hundred percent with everything their church teaches unless they check their brain at the door, something I refuse to do!"

"You're not going to budge, are you?"

"I offered the limit of my compromises, which were the alternate rules I explained, with the caveat that I would continue doing what I do when you aren't there."

"You don't think I'm worth compromising further?"

"This above all: to thine own self be true"

*And it must follow, as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man."*

"Shakespeare, right?"

"Yes. Though the original meaning is different from how we understand it today. In context, it's referring back to borrowing money, lending money, carousing with women of dubious character, and other intemperate pursuits. That behavior is 'false' in the sense that it's detrimental. In other words, Polonius is trying to instruct Laertes on how to be virtuous. Of course, it's ironic because Polonius is anything but virtuous, meeting his end while spying on Hamlet.

"In a modern context, we've changed it to mean acting according to your own nature rather than trying to be something you are not. In this case, being 'true' means acting with integrity while being who you are and doing what you need to do that fulfills you, so long as you don't harm another person. Nobody has a stronger interest in your happiness than you do."

"And you'll only be happy if you can be naked in the sauna with anyone you want, including your own kids?"

"I could be happy without doing that, but in the end, it perfectly encapsulates my worldview. I believe, and I admit I could be wrong, that that would just be the start of it, and you would push back until I followed social norms, which would make me decidedly unhappy."

"And you think that's what I would do?"

"I can draw a line from point A to point B," I said.

"And you got what you wanted, so no big deal, right?"

I wanted to scream and bang my head on the wall, but that wouldn't change things except to give me a headache.

"That is not true, but if that's what you think, there's no point in continuing this conversation. If you're at hockey camp, I'll see you there."

She didn't respond, and I heard the telltale beeps of the call disconnecting. I closed my phone, stuck it in my pocket, and went downstairs.

 Albert

After we arrived home from breakfast, I walked to the hospital where Mom worked to meet with other members of my Scout troop to begin our service project. We gathered in the pediatric ward, and Doctor Lisa Mendez spoke to us and explained the basic rules, the most important of which was that if there was a sign on a door to a room requiring masks, we had to follow it fastidiously, so as not to put the kid at risk. She introduced us to the nurses and candy stripers, and then Nurse Brad showed us where the games were.

Uncle Dave gave us each a name and room number, and I was assigned to a ten-year-old kid with leukemia named Bobby who wanted to play *Risk*. I went to get the game, and a cute candy striper followed me.

"Hi! I'm Billie!" she said.

"Albert."

"I'm a Senior at Maria. Are you a Junior or Senior?"

I chuckled, "Eighth grade."

"Uh, er, oops. You're tall and you look older!"

I grinned, "Flattery will get you everywhere!"

She laughed softly, "You're what? Thirteen?"

"Yes. Want to play *Risk* with us?"

"Sure!"

I grabbed the box and Billie and I headed to Bobby's room.

"Hi! I'm Albert," I said. "The nurse said you wanted to play *Risk*. Are you OK with a girl playing with us?"

"HEY!" Billie protested.

"Ten-year-old boys don't usually hang-out with eighteen-year-old girls," I chuckled.

"Yeah, it's cool," Bobby agreed.

I moved a table to the bed and set the board on it, then we chose colors, and began the process of choosing countries and setting out pieces.

"How long have you been in the hospital?" I asked as we started playing.

"Almost two months."

"Do you know how long you'll be here?"

"The chemo is working, and I need one more round. My blast count is below 5%, which is the level that means you're in remission, if you can stay there."

"That's cool."

"What do you do besides Scouts?"

"Fly," I said. "My friend in the Navy is teaching me."

"WOW! That's so cool! Do you want to be a Navy pilot?"

"Yes. I'm going to try for an appointment to the Naval Academy."

"What grade?"

"Eighth. You?"

"Fifth, but I have a tutor because I can't go to school. I should be able to go back for sixth grade."

"Where?"

"Mount Carmel. You?"

"The Lab School at UofC."

I spent close to two hours with Bobby and Billie, and Bobby won the *Risk* game. Before we left, I promised to see him the following Saturday.

"Too bad you aren't a few years older," Billie said after we left the room.

"Not much I can do about that! Sorry! See you next Saturday?"

"Yes."

 Steve

"What did you think?" I asked Emma once we were back at the house to have lunch before the afternoon class with my private students.

"I think I'll enjoy it," she said. "I was surprised you gave me a uniform and had me participate."

"It's the best way to learn," I said. "And you'll need it for this afternoon."

"So you can tie me up with the belt?" Emma smirked.

"That is not what I meant," I chuckled. "And I don't think Sensei Will would understand."

"I bet you're wrong! His wife is gorgeous!"

"I have no clue about that part of their life," I replied with a grin. "And no intention of finding out!"

"Given your extensive experience, you have to have played that way."

"Ask me later," I said. "Right now, we need to join the others for lunch!"

We ate lunch, then Emma and I left the house, joined by Birgit, who was home from taking Kjell to the airport, to head to the dojo for the class with my private students.

"What's the difference between this one and the morning class?"

"Birgit?" I prompted.

"Dad's goes to '11'!" she giggled. "Like everything else!"

"Pumpkin..." I said, shaking my head.

"I like to tease my dad," she said. "But the afternoon class is for students who are serious about living the principles of the «Dōjō kun». The first and most important one is: *Seek perfection of character*. And according to Master Funakoshi, known as *Shōtō*, the founder of Shōtōkan Karate-Do: *The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of the participant*."

"Dad takes that seriously and insists his students take it seriously. Part of becoming his student is accepting his guidance and correction and opening yourself to examination on those principles while striving for perfection in the practice of karate. The group you are going to meet are the truly serious students in the dojo who have accepted my dad as their mentor, guide, and master."

"I've yet to meet a fourteen-year-old girl who agreed her dad was master!"

"Busted, Pumpkin!" I chuckled.

"Hey, I *mostly* listen to you!" Birgit protested. "Nobody else in the group is perfect, either!"

"I think I'll mention to Jesse and Albert that you just admitted you aren't perfect!"

"DO YOU WANT TO DIE?!" Birgit growled threatenngly.

"That escalated quickly," Emma said, laughing.

"There's a healthy boys versus girls rivalry at the Compound," I said.

"It's no contest! Birgit smirked. "Girls win every time!"

"I don't know," Emma said. "Your dad has three gorgeous wives and two gorgeous girlfriends, and freedom to boot! I think he's won!"

"I was born into the circus," Birgit said. "You chose it!"

Emma laughed again, "Good point! How many students do you have, Steve?"

"You'll be the tenth, which is about the limit. Well, assuming you move here as you suggested you would."

"That's a done deal. I discussed it with my dad, and he made some calls about getting into Lane Tech, and they committed to accepting me next Fall. I'll tell my mom when I go home and move in June, right after school is out."

"What year?" Birgit asked.

"I'll be a Junior when I move here."

"So, only one grade ahead of me. Cool! We can be friends!"

"That's all I need," I said ruefully.

"I'll make sure she talks with Aunt Penny, too!" Brigit giggled.

"You are a major troublemaker, Pumpkin!"

"Thank you!" she exclaimed.

 Jesse

"Did you decide what to do about the Valentine's Day party?" Luna asked when she arrived at the house to have lunch.

"We can't do what Simone wanted, for sure. If we had a party, the limits would have to be kissing. Anything else is too risky in a group, even if we trust everyone. It only takes one slip, and all of us could be in serious trouble."

"I pretty much figured that would be the case. You turn seventeen on February 22nd, right?"

"Yes."

"So after that, so long as everyone was over seventeen, we could do more?"

"We could, and it would be legal, but that doesn't mean it would be smart. Don't get me wrong -- it sounds like a lot of fun, so long as it didn't get out of hand, but parents could still complain about anyone who was under eighteen, and that could cause problems for hockey and softball."

"You're probably right," Luna admitted. "You pointed out the only reason there wasn't any serious fallout from the sauna is because we didn't actually do anything."

"Exactly. Society has its head so far up its butt that I'm not sure it's fixable. I'm curious -- if we actually did what Simone suggested, how far would you go?"

"In front of others? I'd dance naked, and make out, but not do anything more. Even in private, I wouldn't have sex with just anyone. I know guys don't discriminate if pussy is available, but girls do."

"I have turned girls down," I said.

Luna laughed, "You have pretty much total access to the best pussy in the school, so you CAN turn it down! Most guys would give one of their balls to have a single one of those girls, most of whom wouldn't give them the time of day!"

"I have to ask," I said with a smirk, "how you know it's the 'best pussy'? Have you sampled it to know?"

"Ewww! No way! I mean, OK, sure, it's OK if someone wants to do that, but not me! Would *you*?"

"We just established I had!" I chuckled.

"I meant have sex with a guy, you clown!" Luna said, laughing.

"No. I have no interest in experimenting."

"What about a threesome with a guy and a girl?"

"That holds no interest. That said, two girls..."

"Pig!" Luna exclaimed, but she was laughing when she said it.

"Would YOU have a threesome?"

"Two guys might be interesting, but I don't want to fool around with a girl."

"You can have a threesome where that doesn't happen," I said. "But when everyone participates with everyone, it's way more fun."

"I'll take your word for it!"

"Changing subjects, did you schedule your campus visit to Arizona State?"

"Yes. It's the weekend of February 22nd, and I'll attend classes the following Monday. CeCe and I are going to hang out when I'm not in some organized activity. I'm really looking forward to moving out of my house and being on my own! Well, in a dorm, but you know what I mean."

"I do. Have fun, but be smart, and don't go crazy."

"CeCe is having a great time, and she's not doing anything crazier than the average college student! You don't hear from her?"

"Only occasionally. She and her family were in California over Christmas break, which I'm sure you knew."

"I did. I was bummed because I wanted to see her."

We finished lunch, and Luna helped me wash the few dishes we'd used.

"Now what?" Luna asked after I put the last dish away.

"That's up to you," I said.

"Then let's go up to your room and fool around!"

I took her hand and led the way.

 Steve

"You've made up your mind?" I asked Emma as we went to the playroom after karate class.

"Yes. I hope it was OK to say that in front of Birgit."

"As I've said, we're pretty open about things here at the Compound; we just don't advertise, and we're circumspect whenever the government is involved in any way."

"How will this work?" she asked as we began undressing.

"Well, usually, the guy gets an erection, then..." I smirked.

"Not *this* this," Emma interrupted, rolling her eyes. "Me moving here!"

"That depends in large part on what you want. If you want to join the dojo, you'll need to attend classes regularly. If you want a mentorship arrangement, then we'll need to set aside a time to meet. If you want to hang out here or come to Philosophy Club, that's up to you, though I'd strongly encourage it. Beyond that, the main concern is wanting to work for me because there's an unofficial rule about hiring girls I've slept with."

"NOW you tell me?!" she protested as we climbed into bed.

"Relax," I said. "It's unofficial, and you didn't know in advance. I don't have a problem with hiring someone I've slept with, but my attorneys do. That means not revealing the extent of our relationship to them. At least in the short term,

that's not a problem because we need to keep things on the QT because you don't turn seventeen until October.

"In addition, you mentioned dating, and I'm going to assume that means, at some point, you'll be exclusive with a guy because you'll want to have sex, and cheating isn't an option for either of us. That doesn't mean you can't have sex with another guy while we're involved, but you'd have to make it clear to him you weren't exclusive. Otherwise, it's up to you how this goes."

"Not to be a bitch, but you seem totally disinterested."

"On the contrary, I'm VERY interested, and I want to be with you and have you as a friend and protégé. But I needed to get all of the considerations out in the open. I'm happy I met you, and I'm happy you're here, and that would be true even if we weren't sleeping together. Sex is *not* a requirement for our relationship, but it's a wonderful way to bond."

"Speaking of that, before we screw each other silly, what about the karate belt question?"

"I've engaged in light bondage," I replied. "But I don't really get off on it, and it has to be with someone I've been with before and trust, both ways. And it cannot be a rape fantasy."

"So you would under the right circumstances?"

"I would; both ways -- tying up and being tied up. Is that something with which you want to experiment?"

"I hadn't really thought about it; I was just teasing. I guess I don't see how it would be pleasurable for me either way."

"Then, generally speaking, you don't do it."

"Generally speaking?"

"There are things which I don't find directly pleasurable but which I do because the girl derives pleasure from doing it. For me, the girl's pleasure is important, so I get indirect pleasure from doing things that aren't very pleasurable."

"That sounds like circumlocution! Care to say directly what you're trying to avoid saying?"

I laughed, "Certain paraphilias!"

"Now you're just being difficult!"

"I have, when the girl has desired it, allowed her to peg me -- that is, use a strap-on for anal sex."

"IIIIINTERESTING!" Emma smirked. "And what would the necessary conditions be?"

"At this point? All you have to do is ask."

"Let me think about it. Dinner is in just over three hours, so may I suggest we stop talking and start fooling around?"

"You may!"



January 5, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Sunday morning, I walked Jessica to work, then used the treadmill. After a shower, Birgit and I had our usual cuddle time, then joined the rest of the family for breakfast. After breakfast, Kara, Suzanne, and I went to the Indian room to spend time together.

"You aren't seeing Emma this morning, right?" Kara asked.

"Correct. Her dad is taking her to the airport. We don't want to give the wrong impression."

"How did you leave things with her?"

"She's going to visit during Spring Break, and then she'll be back in June. Her dad arranged for her to attend Lane Tech, so that's set, and she's going to join the dojo. She made it fairly clear that her primary goals are mentoring and intellectual challenge. If I had to give odds, I'd say that the physical part of our relationship ends when she starts dating in the Fall."

"Interesting," Kara observed. "I got the idea she wanted something similar to Natalie."

"That might have been true at first, but I think taking a week to think about it led her to the conclusion that I was the right person to initiate her, if you will, but the true nature of our relationship is being her mentor with the ultimate goal of working for NIKA and being a close confidante and intellectual sparring partner."

"She's extremely intelligent and very mature," Suzanne observed. "So that actually doesn't surprise me. That was actually an option for me, but I chose a different course. I could have gone Natalie's route, obviously, or the one Emma

appears to have chosen, but this was so much better for me. The key difference between Natalie and me is she wants kids, and I absolutely do not!"

"If living here didn't drive that home, nothing would," I chuckled.

"I love all your kids, but they're all mature and basically teenagers, though technically Ashley isn't. I do NOT deal well with babies or toddlers, and the *last* thing I want to do is change a diaper! Now, if I could have them show up at age twelve, or so, great? Before that? No chance! What do you plan to do about Liz?"

"Nothing. She doesn't need to know. If things go the way I expect, there won't be any signs Liz could point to, and it's over six years before Emma will graduate. It's similar to the situation with Cecily Younger, who will attend IIT. Her fiancé, James, is applying for Attending positions here in Chicago, and Jess thinks UofC will hire him. And Estrella made the Penny decision, so no problem there, either, as we discussed."

"Slightly changing subjects; do you plan to take advantage of the waiver Jess offered?"

"I haven't given it a lot of thought, really. Emma was here, and I had the thing with Nadia."

"You really aren't comfortable with bondage, are you?" Kara asked.

"I don't get off on it," I said. "But we've played some, but that was in the context of a deep, intimate relationship. And it was only really serious with Elyse that one time. To be honest, despite her denials, what Nadia wanted was close to a rape fantasy. Not quite, but close enough to make me uncomfortable. The babysitter fantasy, on the other hand..."

Both Kara and Suzanne laughed.

"Or cheerleaders with V-cards!" Kara teased.

"Fun, but foolish," I said. "Not a mistake I'll make again."

"You mean the girl who was only fourteen?"

"Yes, but the bigger problem was them talking about it. It's similar to what Jesse and I discussed before the team sauna last week. The problem isn't the kids being naked together; the problem is the kids *talking* about being naked together and causing trouble at school or with parents.

"We were lucky nobody called DCFS. We'd have been OK, in the end, I think, but the Seniors might have been in trouble if someone had really pressed it, given they were eighteen and there were kids under seventeen. The same risk was there with Tiffany being in the sauna with the kids. Julie did not appreciate that."

"She got over it!" Kara tittered. "You waved your magic wand, and the problem went away!"

"She did, but what if she'd complained to someone officially? You know darn well SOME parent will do that, eventually. That's why I've been adamant to Jesse that if they do use the sauna, nothing can happen, not even teasing. They have to be able to honestly deny ANY accusations other than being naked in the sauna."

"Society is messed up," Suzanne observed. "We're creating a generation of neurotic, puritanical kids who have a VERY unhealthy view of their bodies and of sex. And we're denying them access to the information they need to make informed decisions. Bethany proved that in spades, and even though she caved, she still doesn't agree with you."

"It's deeper than that," Kara observed. "MUCH deeper! As in, Bethany wants Steve deep in HER and can't have him. She's, to use a cliché, green with envy of any girl who is with him."

"I don't think it's quite that simple," I countered. "I'll admit that is part of it, but she's also under severe pressure from her colleagues to repudiate the book because it sends a sex-positive message for teenagers when society has decided that teenage sexuality is something to be stamped out, hormones and consequences be damned."

"Sadly," Suzanne agreed. "Changing subjects, who'll be at the game today?"

"The extended family, Andi and her dad, Samantha and Brian, the Penfield family, the Kallas family, the Jaeger family, ten guys from the hockey team, four girls from the softball team, and a pair of cheerleaders."

"And in the past, those two roses would be plucked before the night is out!" Kara teased.

"As tempting as it might have been in the past, I do need to stick to the rules."

"With exceptions."

"Yes, but few and far between. Avanti is an obvious one, and the Saint Martin trip, but after that? Unlikely for all the reasons we've discussed."

"You're still you, Steve," Kara said. "So the opportunities will present themselves, and you'll know when it's right to make an exception."

"Dude! This is SO cool!" Tomás exclaimed when he came into the Spurgeon box at the United Center.

"I've been in here before, and I still think it's way cool!" Freddy declared. "And I see some hot chicks showed up!"

I chuckled, "You have your choice of four softball players and two cheerleaders if they'll even give you the time of day!"

"Freddy is on it!" he grinned.

"Just don't get tossed over the railing, please!"

"Is Birgit going to be here?" Tomás asked.

"Dad said she would," I replied. "So I assume so. They should be here soon. Dad and I showed up early to make sure everything was ready."

"And all this food is just free?"

"Not even close! Dad and Samantha paid for it, so you don't have to pay, but it's not free! Just please don't try to sneak a beer."

"I remember you saying that when you invited us. I'm going to grab some food and then chat with the girls!"

"Go for it!"

"Hi, Jesse!" Luna exclaimed, coming into the box with Chung Cha, Simone, and Jazlyn.

"Hi! Grab some food, something to drink, and enjoy yourselves!"

"Thanks!" all four girls exclaimed.

 Steve

"Dad," Birgit said quietly. "What's HE doing here?"

I looked in the direction she indicated and saw the criminal defense attorney who had represented Arnold Gardner. He was with Eduardo, Michael, and Andi, so I had to assume he was Andi's dad. I'd never met him and never heard his name mentioned, except in court.

"I think that's Andi's dad," I said. "Remember, defense attorneys perform a valuable service, and even the more vile accusations need to be proved beyond reasonable doubt by the government."

"I agree," Birgit said. "But that doesn't mean I have to associate with him!"

"So ignore him, please. Hang out with your sisters and your friends."

She made a face but walked away, and I moved across the room to where Eduardo and he were standing.

"This is uncomfortable," Mr. Peterson said. "I was just asking Eduardo if I should leave."

"No, you shouldn't," I said. "Melanie Spencer is one of my best friends, and I've known her since Junior High. She's defended some pretty heinous charges, but

that's her job, and it's a necessary one in a free society governed by laws. Please, stay, though I'd suggest not speaking with Birgit."

"I understand, not that I'd approach a teenage girl and start a conversation."

"No, but she'd approach YOU and give you a piece of her mind!" Eduardo declared. "Though I think Steve calmed her down."

"She wasn't upset," I said. "Just surprised. And she's friends with Melanie, too, so she knows the score."

"I had no idea you were Michael's dad until Eduardo told me once I saw you and your daughter and asked if I should leave."

"Just enjoy yourself," I said. "If Andi has her way, we'll be related by marriage!"

He and Eduardo both laughed.

"I don't think I'm ready for a teenage daughter!"

"Too late!" I chuckled. "She's the same age as Michael, right?"

"Yes. Thirteen. Their birthdays are about a week apart."

"At this point, they're more concerned about robotics, computers, and gaming," Eduardo said. "I wouldn't worry just yet."

"Easy for you to say, with two boys!" Joel said, shaking his head. "How many kids do you have, Steve?"

"Seven. The two you know, plus two boys and three girls, with Birgit being the eldest of the girls. Jesse, the tall kid with light brown hair who has the tall Hispanic girl hanging on him, is my eldest."

"The hockey player, right?"

"Yes. Do you have other kids?"

"No, just Andi. One was our limit! I don't know how you do it!"

"Zone defense," I replied with a grin.

Joel laughed, "I hear you."

"Let's get some food and enjoy the game!"

Everyone arrived before the anthem, and when that was played, we all moved to seats at the front of the box. The game was hard fought, and it looked like it was in the bag for the Hawks, leading 3-2 late in the third period. It was not to be because Dave Lewis pulled CuJo with about ninety seconds left in the period, and Brett Hull scored with 37 seconds remaining. That sent the game to overtime, and just over a minute into overtime, Hull scored again, giving the Red Wings a 4-3 win.

"Now that sucked!" Terry grouched. "Leading the whole way, and only needing to hold them for another forty seconds or so, but give up two goals in less than two minutes!"

"Hull is a great player," Brian said. "Despite Steve objecting to the result of the Cup final in 1999."

"The league's explanation was bullshit!" I declared. "The fact that they changed the rule afterwards tells me everything I need to know!"

"You weren't upset enough to change the name of the conference room," Samantha smirked.

"I would never diss the Golden Jet because of the Golden Brat!" I declared.

"Golden *Brett*!" Jesse corrected.

"I said it the way I hear it!" I grinned. "Ready to go?"

"Yes."

XIII. Missing Persons

January 6, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

At 4:20pm on Monday, after a full day of working on the NIKA backend system, I left the office to meet Shaye at Caribou, across from 550 West Jackson, where we had our temporary offices. When I arrived, she was sitting at a table and hopped up to join me at the counter. She ordered hot cocoa, and I ordered a coffee of the day, both of which I paid for. When our orders were ready, we took our cups and sat at a table in the corner.

"How many times has that worked?" Shaye asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"That was the first time I've tried it," I chuckled. "And mostly, it was done to tease Penny. I was shocked that it actually worked!"

"I was surprised someone would try something so corny! And I surprised myself by writing my name and number on the pad and giving it to you."

"Care to share?"

"I figured someone so corny had to be fun, and you didn't seem creepy in any way and very friendly. I did that, handed it to you, and as I walked away with your order, I thought it might have been a bad idea."

"You could have politely declined when I called you," I said.

"I was actually going to do that, but then decided that it would be tacky to have given you my number then say 'no'. And when you suggested meeting for coffee, I figured that was totally safe. I was also intrigued by you saying that your ex working for you only scratched the surface of strange. My natural curiosity took over at that point."

"I do need to tell you a few very important things," I said. "But please hear me out and let me finish. After that, you can ask questions or take off if you want."

"Uhm, OK," she said, sounding concerned.

"I'm not a stalker or psycho," I said with a smile. "But of course, that's exactly what a stalker or psycho would say!"

Shaye laughed, which was a good sign.

"True!" she agreed. "Go ahead."

"I have what some people would call an open relationship. I'm in a committed, lifelong relationship, but I'm free to date or have other relationships, however I see fit, within a set of rules. That means flirting with you, getting your number, and meeting you here was not cheating or an attempt to cheat, and I could, if I chose, take this as far as you were willing, assuming you were. It's much more complicated than what I just said, but that's the gist."

"You're married? I should have known!"

"Sorry. If that's a non-starter, I totally understand. As I said, you can ask questions, or if you're completely uncomfortable or not interested, I won't be upset or offended if you walk out."

"Did you just feed me a line?"

I shook my head, "No. My relationships are complex, and I have the freedom to conduct my relationships as I please, including having a long-term girlfriend."

"You're looking for another mistress?"

"That implies keeping it secret. I wouldn't, and in fact, couldn't, because complete openness is one price of the freedom I have."

"Your wife is seriously OK with you having girlfriends and, by implication, fooling around?"

"Not only OK but encourages it. It's a long story, and I can tell you most of it if you really want to know. But suffice it to say, she'd not just be OK with me seeing you; she'd approve."

"What does she do?"

"She's an Attending trauma surgeon at UofC Hospital," I replied. "We met when she was in medical school. We negotiated our agreement while we were dating long-distance because she was in Indianapolis and I was in Chicago. We've been married for just over seventeen years."

"Kids?"

"She and I have two, a boy who's thirteen and a girl who's eleven."

"Implying you have kids by other women?"

"Yes. Again, it's complicated."

"It feels like you're being cagey."

"I am, because my life is very unconventional, and there are prudes and Puritans and busybodies who would cause more trouble than I care to think about if I was completely open with someone I had just met."

I had been with Emma, but the vibe had been very different. I knew zero about Shaye beyond what she studied and where she worked, so I was being circumspect, as my wives and I had agreed.

"Let me guess; I go to bed with you, and you'll tell me everything?"

"No. That *might* happen, but it really depends on what you want. You can obviously refuse to answer, but when you gave me your number and when you agreed to meet me, what were you thinking was going to happen?"

Shaye laughed, "As if!"

"That actually answers my question, I said.

Shaye was quiet, and I simply let the silence build until Shaye was uncomfortable and finally said something.

"If I don't answer, that's it? I should just leave?"

"That's up to you," I replied. "You implied I was using caginess to lure you into bed, but that's not true. Let me go first, and you can decide if you want to stay or leave. I was attracted to you the moment I saw you. When you stepped onto the menu, I realized you were playful and knew how to enjoy life. When you gave me your number, and it was your real number, I was confident that you were attracted to me.

"When you agreed to meet, I took it as a possibility it would lead where you suggested. That is absolutely something that interests me, and I'll say it flat out -- you're sexy, and I'd love to go to bed together if that's what we both want and you think it's the right thing to do. If not, then we either go our separate ways or explore some other relationship, which might or might not lead to the same destination.

"Whether I take you into my confidence and give you the entire scoop, which is about as strange as anything you'll encounter outside a Heinlein novel, is a different thing, which is not connected to going to bed the way you think it is. In fact, the usual progress is I reveal everything, and the shock factor results in a completely new way of thinking, which often, but not always, results in having sex.

"The question before you is whether you have the confidence to express your feelings and a willingness to rethink everything you've been taught. In other words, how open is your mind? If it's not open to truly countercultural thinking, then finish your cocoa, and I'll see you the next time in the café for lunch. On the other hand, if you have the usual worldview of an artist, then stay, and we'll talk. It's up to you."



January 6, 2003, Oswego, Illinois

 Matthew

"Nobody has seen Maggie?" Mr. Fruits asked on Monday afternoon when the drama club gathered.

"No," I said. "I spoke to the Aurora Police, and they're looking for her."

"I spoke to them as well," he said. "I think they called everyone here, right?"

Everyone nodded or said 'Yes' or 'Yeah'.

"I made flyers," Mr. Fruits said. "I want each of you to hand them out to your neighbors. I'll hit all the businesses in Oswego and Montgomery. The office staff are putting them up in the school right now. I know it's tough, but we need to begin working on *Fiddler on the Roof*, as we have only eight weeks and three days before opening night."

Nobody's heart was in it, but we ran through the chorus numbers, and Mr. Fruits had individuals sing some of the solo parts so he could decide who to assign to those roles. When practice finished, I rode home with Lisa, a Senior who lived in our subdivision, and we agreed to divide the subdivision in half and hand out the fliers.

[Chicago, Illinois]



Steve

Before Shaye could answer, a nice-looking woman with long black hair approached the table, who I guessed was about my age but perhaps a few years younger.

"Hi, Shaye!" she exclaimed.

I almost laughed because I was positive this was one of the oldest ploys in the book -- a friend showing up about fifteen minutes after a coffee date began, giving the girl a chance to bail while maintaining a façade of happenstance. It

didn't bother me, as it was a way to effectively defuse what might be an uncomfortable situation.

"Hi, Deanna. Steve Adams, my mentor, Deanna Haight. Deanna, Steve Adams."

"Nice to meet you," I said. "I take it you're an artist?"

"Painter," Deanna replied. "I graduated from the School of the Art Institute in 1986."

"What do you paint?" I asked.

"Mostly abstract, but I've dabbled with other things as well. You're some kind of IT executive?"

"Yes and no. I'm President and majority shareholder of my company, but my day-to-day work is as a software engineer. Do you work besides in your studio?"

"I give art classes at a workshop sponsored by my patron, mentor a Freshman student every year at the School, and paint, of course."

"Old school?" I asked.

"You mean having a patron? It beats waiting tables to be able to eat!"

"Starving artist?"

"No, but I play one at art shows! My patron is fairly generous. He runs his own company, too."

"Mind if I ask what he does?"

"He runs an investment company, Clermont Capital."

I chuckled, "I've met him, then. I'm from Milford, Ohio."

"GET OUT!" she exclaimed. "Me, too!"

"Not meaning any offense, but you're about my age, and I'd remember you from Milford High. Private school?"

"McNicholas. I was a good Catholic girl, at least until I came to Chicago!"

"I was never a good Catholic boy," I chuckled. "Much to my priest's and my mom's chagrin!"

"Father Buschmiller at Saint Andrews, right?"

"Yes, but I quit going around age fourteen."

"We mostly went to Saturday evening mass."

"Sundays mostly for me, which explains why I didn't see you there. Shaye, I won't be upset if you want to use your 'friend in need' escape."

Shaye and Deanna both laughed.

"That obvious?" Shaye asked.

"It's a tried and true ploy," I said. "And I'm not offended because it's wise and gives you an easy way to walk away without being rude. I invited you for coffee in a place with open seating to ensure you were comfortable and could walk away at any point."

"Shaye, come chat for a sec," Denna said. "If your guy doesn't mind."

"He doesn't," I said.

They moved to a spot far enough away that I wouldn't overhear the hushed conversation. I sipped my coffee and waited, and about four minutes later, the girls hugged; Deanna left, and Shaye returned to the table.

"I'm glad you decided to stay, however this turns out," I said.

"Deanna said that you're hot, and if I wasn't interested, I should give you her card!"

"Good to know! She's not in a committed relationship of some kind?"

"I actually don't know much about her relationships, but I know her patron pays for her studio, the art workshop she runs, and gives her a stipend. I can put two and two together and know they make four, but I actually don't know if that's true or not."

"So, she's circumspect about her relationships?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Yes. Shall we go back to the conversation?"

Shaye smiled, "Deanna reminded me how she met her patron."

"Something you could share without violating a confidence?"

"She's never been shy about how they met. He was an up-and-coming guy at another firm, and one of her friends had chatted him up while waitressing at Ed

Debevic's. That friend showed up at the future patron's apartment with a bottle of Jack Daniel's. That became the running gag because he was under twenty-one, so this girl and a friend would trade bottles of Jack for sex, though it wasn't really a trade, if you know what I mean."

"I get it. When I was under twenty-one, I had a supplier with similar benefits."

"Anyway, those friends brought Deana to visit once, and she brought a bottle of Jack, so he knew she wanted to screw. The two other girls moved on, which was their thing, according to Deanna, but she kept seeing the guy. He bought a house, she moved in, and he rented her an attic room, which was a combination studio and bedroom. Not too long after, he was promoted and offered her a stipend plus room and board. He's been sponsoring her ever since."

"And?" I prompted, confident I knew where this was going.

Shaye laughed, "She quoted her patron -- what's worth doing is worth doing for money!"

I laughed, "I've said that myself. That leads to an important question, though you might not know the answer -- was sex a *quid pro quo* for his patronage?"

"No. That had ended because...well, call it personal circumstances for her patron. Whether it ever started again, I can only speculate. I assume it did, but I can't say for sure because she is, as you observed, circumspect."

"Deanna's suggestion aside, is that something that interests you? Finding a patron?"

"I'll turn it around -- is that something you would do?"

"I have, once before, for a medical student. My patronage ended when she married because her husband wasn't comfortable with the idea."

"Duh!" Shaye exclaimed.

"There was no *quid pro quo* for my patronage. For him, it was more about taking responsibility for his wife."

"But she slept with you?"

"My usual response is 'no comment' because it's «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) to talk about it."

"It's what?"

"A Russian word meaning 'uncultured', best translated as 'rude' or 'uncouth' in this context."

"I'm going to take that as a 'yes' because if the answer was 'no', you'd have said so."

"Actually, not. With the exception of protecting my married female friends, I would neither confirm nor deny for anyone."

"You're very...interesting."

I chuckled, "It's OK to say 'strange'; I'm called 'strange' all the time!"

"I bet!"

"So, the question before you is, do you want to travel through another dimension; a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind; a journey into a

wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination? Do you want to unlock the door beyond which is another dimension -- a dimension of mind, a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas? Travel a route to a land of the different, the bizarre, the unexplainable, a wondrous dimension where the limits are only those of mind itself?"

"Why do I feel as if I should know that?"

"It's an amalgam of several different *Twilight Zone* intros. It aired from 1958 through 1964. I was one when it ended, and your parents were probably toddlers or perhaps in grade school, if you're eighteen or nineteen."

"Nineteen in two weeks. Now you have me even more intrigued."

"Then, to quote Morpheus, "*This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill -- the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill -- you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.*"

"Don't you mean I take the red pill and wake up in YOUR bed?" she asked with an arched eyebrow.

"As I said earlier, the result is often, but not always, sex. I will also modify Morpheus' statement such that you may take some time to think about it and call me when you decide what to do."

"That's probably best. A few days?"

"I don't have a timeline, and there's no expiration date on the offer of friendship or more. There is one important thing -- my wife, the trauma surgeon, requires any new partner to have a recent clean STI test, with no exceptions. To be sacrilegious, she'd insist the Virgin Mary have an STI test."

Shaye laughed, "Point taken, and I totally get it. But Mary would never have sex, so, pointless!"

I chuckled, "True, though there was this nun..."

"I can't tell if you're joking or not!"

"I am."

But only because Michelle had become a novice *after* we'd made love, and we didn't have sex after she became a nun until after she was released by Mother Christophora.

"Thanks for the hot chocolate," Shaye said. "I promise I'll call before the end of the week."

"Take as much time as you need to think about it," I said. "But I would ask you to do one thing either way."

"What's that?"

"Let Deanna know I'd like to sit down for coffee with her patron, that I understand if it needs to be completely private, and that I won't be offended if he declines."

"I'll let her know."

We finished our drinks and left Caribou together. She headed for the L in the Loop, and I headed for the parking lot on Halsted, where my BMW waited to take me home.

 Jesse

"You def earned your reward!" Simone declared after our third round. "If you want it!"

"As if any sane guy would turn that down?! If you prefer, we can go to the shower so I can rinse off."

"Right, because you haven't French kissed me after putting your tongue in my cooch! Like this is any different?"

"Did that bother you?"

"The first time, I kind of freaked out a bit, but you had made me feel so good I just went for it. I'm used to it now, and besides, if *that* is the only price for your tongue on my button, it's worth it!"

I chuckled, "Girls do seem to like that."

"I had NO idea! I mean, OK, sure, I knew I could bring myself off by diddling my button, but your mouth is like a whole new level! You won't be upset if I say your tongue makes me feel better than screwing?"

"Why would I? Lots of girls get off easier with my mouth than from screwing, though I've learned what to do to alleviate that in most cases."

"Grinding against me, right?"

"That's a big part of it."

"Turn on your back!"

I was happy to oblige and propped myself on my elbows to watch Simone give her first-ever blowjob. With some guidance and experimentation, she quickly got the hang of it, and I watched as she bobbed up and down, taking me about halfway into her mouth each time and sliding her tongue around my glans. After a few minutes, she began stroking me as well, and perhaps five minutes later, I groaned and shot off in her mouth. Simone didn't stop bobbing and swirling her tongue, and I felt her swallow after the last spurt. She bobbed once more, released me, then moved up and gave me a savage French kiss, shoving her tongue into my mouth.

"Turnabout is fair play!" she smirked when we broke the kiss a minute later.

"I've had girls do that without swallowing," I chuckled.

"NO WAY!" she gasped; "SERIOUSLY?! And you were OK with it?"

"I stuck my tongue in you after we screwed, so you tell me!"

"Uh, oops, yeah!"

"One piece of advice? If you're with a guy for the first time, make sure he's OK with it before you do that, *especially* if you don't swallow."

"You're saying it's OK to not swallow and kiss you?"

"If you want."

"Lie back again!" she exclaimed.

I laughed and was the happy recipient of her second-ever blowjob, after which she kissed me without swallowing, holding the kiss for a long time.

"Shower?" I suggested. "You said you needed to be home by 5:30pm."

"Yes! Next Monday?"

"Next Monday!"

 Birgit

"Can I ask you a question?" Zahra asked when we finished our homework.

"Sure."

"Privately? Zaida will wait for me."

I said 'goodbye' to Fangsu, Hannah, Naomi, and Leslie, then, because nobody was in the Indian room, Zahra and I went there.

"What's up?" I asked.

"My dad is being difficult," she said. "He's going to ask Jesse to speak to the imam at our mosque, and I know Jesse will say 'no'. When that happens, I'm afraid my dad will tell your dad that Jesse shouldn't take me to lunch and stuff."

Well, I thought, if her dad knew about 'and stuff', she'd never be allowed out of the house without an armed escort!

"I'm not sure there's anything I can do," I said.

"Cover for me? If I hang out with Jesse on Wednesday afternoon instead of studying?"

"If you walk here with me, then go out the door to the yard and walk to the coach house, then leave by our front door, nobody will know. What if someone comes looking for you?"

"Wednesdays, my mom visits grandmother and is never home before 5:00pm, so nobody would check. My dad doesn't get home from work until around 5:45pm. And Zaida will walk home with me as we do the other days."

"I don't have a problem with any of that, but you do have to consider what would happen if you were caught."

"I know, but I really like Jesse. A lot!"

She and dozens of other girls did, but she had a severe impediment. Well, beyond not being a blonde Russian girl who I was positive would be the one who would convince Jesse to commit.

"The religious differences are a big problem," I observed.

"I know, but I can't help how I feel."

"I totally get that, and so long as you're going in with your eyes open, then it's not really my business."

"I don't close my eyes because I like to see him!" Zahra exclaimed.

I laughed, "TMI!"

"Oh, sorry! I guess that is weird about your brother."

"Everything about my brothers is weird! All of them!"

Zahra laughed, "You're so funny, Birgit! Anyway, I need to go so we're not late. Thanks a bunch!"

"You're welcome!"

We left the Indian room, I walked Zahra and Zaida to the door, and once they had left, I went to the kitchen to help Yuriko with dinner.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Are you doing OK, Matthew?" Mom asked at dinner.

"Not really."

"Don't blame yourself, please."

"I try not to, but I wonder if I could have done something."

"Break up with Chelsea?" Eduardo asked.

"No way! Of course not!"

"That is what Maggie wanted, right?" he asked.

"Yes," I sighed.

"Eduardo is making a good point," Mom said. "And unless you want to have an arrangement like your dad's, which I don't think Chelsea would accept, there wasn't anything more you could do."

"I have trouble keeping my relationship with Chelsea from going off the rails," I said. "I can't even imagine two or three! Or five!"

"Zero!" Michael declared, causing Mom, Eduardo, and me to laugh.

"Andi has you sized up for a boyfriend," I said. "You may as well give up and give in!"

"Is that what you did?" Mom asked with a sly smile.

"You know it is! I was ready to run away when I was five! But seriously, I don't think Maggie would have accepted that. And if she did, I'd be suspicious that it was really about stealing me from Chelsea."

"Your dad had a situation like that," Mom said. "You can ask him if you're interested."

"Not really," I replied. "I just want Maggie to be found safe."

"We all do," Mom said. "We all do."



January 8, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve, I have an investigator from the DeKalb County Sheriff's office on the line for you," Lucas said when he called me on Wednesday afternoon.

My blood chilled because Nadia was from DeKalb.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No. He asked for 'Steve'."

"Give me three minutes, then put him through to Liz's office, please."

"Will do."

I replaced the receiver and went to Liz's office through the «yōshitsu» room. I quickly explained the situation, and Liz simply shook her head. The phone rang a few seconds later.

"This is Steve Adams," I said. "You're on speaker with me and my corporate council, Liz Crane."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Adams. This is Deputy Randolph with the DeKalb Sheriff's Department. Is your internet handle 'NIKASteve'?"

Liz nodded, so I answered.

"Yes, it is."

"Do you know a young woman named Nadia Granger?"

Liz nodded.

"I know a young woman named Nadia, but I don't know her last name. If her internet handle is DarkDreams82, then yes, I know her."

"When was the last time you spoke with her?"

Liz nodded.

"Online, I'm fairly certain it was January 2nd. She was at my house for about forty minutes the next day. May I ask what's going on?"

"We have a missing person report for her. Can you account for your whereabouts since the 2nd?"

Liz nodded but used a hand signal to indicate a limited answer.

"I can, but on advice of my counsel, I'll only do so in writing."

"I understand your attorney's point, but if I can rule you out, it would make my job easier."

Liz signaled to me that she needed to talk.

"One moment, please," I said. "I'm going to put you on hold."

I pressed the correct buttons so he would hear music, not my conversation with Liz.

"Can you actually account for every minute?"

"Yes. On the 2nd, I was home, and I have my entire family as witnesses, along with a friend who was visiting. On Friday, I had an early meeting at 550, and drove straight from home after my usual morning run with Suzanne and Birgit and breakfast with the family. I worked all day. Nadia came to the house, and when she left, I called a cab, which I paid for and which took her to Union Station. I didn't see her after that.

"The next day, I walked Jess to work and saw two doctors and a nurse I know, then ran with Birgit and Suzanne, had breakfast with the men, went to karate twice, spent some time with a friend from California, drove them to the Gold Coast, then spent the evening with the family. On Sunday, I spent the morning with the family, then was at the Hawks game all afternoon. Monday and yesterday, I did my usual morning routine, worked, and went to karate. The only time I wasn't with someone else was in my car driving back and forth to work, plus the return trip from the Gold Coast."

"OK," Liz said. "That sounds basically ironclad. What you don't want to do is change your story. Give a concise synopsis of where you were, and say there are multiple witnesses."

"OK," I said and activated the speaker phone.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said. "My attorney's advice is to say that I was at home, at the karate dojo where I teach, at work, at Bucktown Bistro, at UofC hospital, and that I have multiple witnesses who can verify I was in those places. At work, we have electronic logs. Two FBI agents can confirm I was in the office on Thursday."

"FBI agents? May I ask?"

Liz nodded but indicated a minimal answer.

"They were asking about a union guy they suspect is mobbed up. He's been a liaison for computer support contracts we've had with the unions for two decades. I couldn't tell them much."

"OK. You haven't left the city since the last time you saw Miss Granger?"

"Correct."

"Did you and Miss Granger engage in sexual relations?"

"No."

"In your messages with her, you discussed a pair of fantasies. One was something to do with babysitting, but the other was never stated."

I looked at Liz, who shrugged, then nodded.

"The babysitter fantasy was what you can imagine -- the teenage babysitter who seduces the dad when he drives her home. The other one was a bondage fantasy. In the end, when she explained it to me, I declined to participate, and that's when I put her in a cab for Union Station."

"That was on the 3rd?"

"Yes. Just before 8:00pm."

"What cab company? I want to ask where she was actually dropped off."

"May I ask when she disappeared?"

"Sometime between when you say she left your house and 9:00am the next morning when she didn't show up for breakfast with her parents. What cab company?"

"American Taxi," I replied. "The pickup address was 4937 South Woodlawn Avenue. I called them from my private number -- 709-555-2425. That should show on their log sheet."

"Thank you, Mr. Adams. That is very helpful. If I have further questions, is it OK to call you directly?"

I looked to Liz, who, after a few seconds, nodded.

"Yes."

"Thank you. I appreciate the information."

"You're welcome."

I pressed the button to disconnect the call.

"You let me answer more than I expected," I observed.

"I realize I'm not Melanie Spencer, but I felt it was better for you to answer than raise suspicion. I was right, and you didn't actually give him anything that could hurt you. You were just cagey enough while sounding forthcoming. Giving him the cab company was a big win, by the way. They'll confirm the pickup and the drop-off, which will bolster your alibi, as it were. May I make an observation?"

"Yes."

"Don't EVER do that again. Seriously. Do NOT meet someone online like that and invite them to your house. You are just asking for trouble!"

"Actually, she's a friend of a friend, not a random contact. Someone sent her my way."

"That's a bit different but still risky. I do have to ask...the fantasy?"

"To be tied spread-eagled to the bed to lose her virginity and be fucked senseless for a few hours after that."

"You're obviously not joking."

"I'm not. It was too close to a rape fantasy for my taste; that's a line I simply cannot cross."

"If you'd had sex with her, your DNA would be there, and no alibi in the world would save you. They'd insist everyone was lying to protect you, given your obvious influence."

"True. Actually, I should call the investigator back because he absolutely should speak to Danielle, the friend. He may or may not know about her, and phone records can take a few days."

"Go ahead. That'll put an even more positive spin on your alibi."

I used the feature on the phone to dial the displayed number from the previous call. While it was ringing, I pulled up the directory on my mobile phone.

"Randolph, Investigations."

"Deputy, this is Steve Adams. I have the name of someone who might be helpful, and that's Nadia's friend who introduced us."

"Do you have a number as well?"

"Yes, and her internet handle. Her name is Danielle Marlowe, her internet handle is SongOfSolomon7, and her home number is 708-555-8744. She works at Starbucks in Hyde Park at 55th and Woodlawn, but I don't have that number handy."

"Thank you, Mr. Adams. I appreciate your coöperation."

"You're welcome, Deputy."

I pressed the button to disconnect the call.

"I'm going to raise an issue that I know will incense you, but you need to consider taking your propranolol again. You're making risky decisions."

"I'll discuss it with Jess," I said.

"Good. You know I only have your best interest at heart. When are you going to Mayo?"

"The second week in February. I'll fly up on Sunday the 9th and fly home the morning of the 12th. Mary asked for two full days."

"They have you meet with a behavioral psychologist, right?"

"Clara Brown," I replied.

"Tell her about this and see what she says."

"Yes, Mom!" I replied with a grin.

"Not until July! And not YOUR mom!"

"Thank Loki!" I declared with a grin. "Thanks for your help."

"It appears I can't leave you unmonitored for more than about a day without you finding some novel way to get into trouble!"

"Life is never not exciting when I'm around!" I grinned.

"Go back to your office, you dope!"

"Penny and I are going to have words!"

"So long as it's only words, Steve."

"Of all the stupid things I could do, that's the *last* one."

"When you're thinking straight, I agree. When you aren't? Different story altogether."



Jesse

"My dad is absolutely going to ask you to speak to the imam when we have lunch on Saturday," Zahra said when she came into the coach house.

"If it will help, I'm happy to talk to Imam Iqbal, but you know what the result will be."

"I don't think anything short of you saying «aš-šahādatu» (*Shahadah*) will suffice."

"It does me no harm to listen politely to the imam, but you're probably right. Is today the last day we can be together?"

"No! I arranged with Birit to cover for me, and I'll walk home with Zaida. She won't say anything, either. I'll be home before my dad, and my mom will see Zaida, so she won't be suspicious."

"So long as you're sure!"

"I am! Should we go upstairs so I can take off my scarf?"

"Yes!"

I took her hand and led her up the stairs.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

The house phone rang just before 7:00pm on Wednesday. I dreaded every time it or my mobile phone had rung since my talk with the detective. Mom and Eduardo were out, so I went to the kitchen to answer it,

"Matt Adams."

"Matt, it's Mary Jones. They found Maggie! She's safe!"

"Awesome! Where?"

"Urbana," Maggie said. "The State Police found her. She's at the hospital now, having a medical check. Joe and I are leaving now to get her. They said she was asking for you. Would your mom allow you to go with us?"

"You know the problem, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Mary said. "Tara told us. I know you and Chelsea are permanent, but I was hoping you could at least talk to Maggie."

"I think I'd have to have Chelsea with me to do that," I said. "And she's in the city."

Mrs. Jones was quiet for a moment, "I'll just tell Maggie we couldn't reach you, OK?"

"Yes. I'll arrange for Chelsea to come here tomorrow, and we can see Maggie after drama practice, OK?"

"Yes. She's not going to school before Monday."

"I'm thrilled they found her. Do you know what happened?"

"No. We'll call you tomorrow if there are any problems."

"Thanks. I'm happy she's safe."

"Me, too!"

We said 'goodbye', and I immediately called Chelsea, who answered the phone on the second ring.

"They found Maggie," I said.

"Is she OK?"

"Her mom said she is, but she's being checked at a hospital in Urbana, which is where they found her. Mrs. Jones said Maggie asked for me and wanted me to go along, but I thought that was a bad idea. I told Mrs. Jones I'd talk with Maggie, but you had to be there."

"Why?" Chelsea asked. "I trust you."

"I know, but I don't want Maggie to get the wrong idea. Tara told Mrs. Jones what was bugging Maggie. I want you to come out to the house after your morning class tomorrow so we can talk to Maggie together. Mom can take you into the city on Friday."

"OK. I'll see you tomorrow, then. I love you!"

"I love you, too!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

I wasn't surprised when Danielle was waiting at the house when my wives, daughters, and I returned from karate.

"What happened?" Danielle asked. "They said Nadia got in a cab around 8:00pm on Friday and was dropped off in Lincoln Park."

"Not Union Station?" I asked.

"No."

"She was here, obviously; we discussed her fantasy; she detected my heart wasn't into her darkest fantasy and decided to leave. I paid the cabbie about double what it would cost to get to Union Station, and she left. The next thing I heard was a call from the DeKalb County Sheriff. I told them what I knew; they obviously checked on the cab, then called you. Any idea why she wouldn't go to Union Station?"

"No. I have no clue what she would be doing in Lincoln Park. The Deputy wouldn't tell me where in Lincoln Park they dropped her off. "

"Do you know if she was chatting online with anyone else?"

"No clue."

"Boyfriends?"

"She was seeing a guy, but I think they broke up last August. I told the Deputy, but I only knew the guy's first name. He lived in DeKalb, though, not in the city. Do you have any ideas?"

"I know some private investigators, but if I were to hire them, that might make the cops suspicious. Have you talked to her parents?"

"No. I wanted to talk to you first to find out what happened. I was afraid she'd freaked out afterwards, but it sounds like nothing happened."

"Not a thing," I replied. "She chose to leave, and, as I said, I called her a cab. I actually offered to drive her, but she turned me down. I think at this point, we just wait for the police to do their thing."

"I'm going to call her parents, plus some mutual friends. See you Sunday for Philosophy Club?"

"Absolutely!"

We hugged, I walked her to the door, then joined my wives in the Indian room.

"The cops told Danielle that the cab dropped Nadia in Lincoln Park, not at Union Station," I said. "Other than that, Danielle didn't have any new information."

"Matthew called while you were talking to Danielle," Kara said. "They found Maggie in Urbana, and she seems to be OK."

"That's good. Jess, Liz got on my case about the situation and suggested my risk analysis is off kilter."

"Because of Nadia?"

"Yes. She said that after we talked to the investigator. And she suggested I start taking the propranolol. I disagree with her but promised to mention it to you to mollify Liz."

"I don't see it," Jessica said. "Nadia was a referral, and you acted exactly as I would have expected, and the three of us agree you made the right decision. And sure, the investigator called you, but that makes perfect sense given the circumstances. She obviously didn't think you were a suspect because she let you talk to them. Kara? Suzanne?"

"If you made any risky decision, it was with Emma," Kara said. "But all three of us were OK with it, especially after we spoke to her. And it's not like you acted impetuously."

"I concur," Suzanne said. "You've worked out a new set of guidelines, and we all agree. So, unless Mary Whittaker thinks there's a problem, I wouldn't take the propranolol."

"I agree, Tiger. If you want to call Mary to make Liz happy, go ahead, but I know you're going to Mayo in about four weeks. And I honestly don't think you're taking undue risks."

"If you think my judgment is suspect, I want you to tell me, please."

"We will," all three of my wives agreed.

"Did you hear from Miss Menu?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"No. I expect her to call at some point."

Just then, my phone rang, and I pulled it out of my pocket and laughed.

"Speak of the leprechaun!" I chuckled.

"Steve Adams," I said, answering the phone.

"Shaye. Any chance we could meet for coffee tomorrow at 4:30pm at Caribou?"

"Absolutely. I'll see you there."

We said 'goodbye', and I closed the phone.

"Coffee at Caribou tomorrow," I said.

"What time is Jesse's game on Saturday?" Suzanne asked.

"They have the first ice time, so 8:00am. I should be home in time for karate. Would my wives like to go to bed?"

"Yes!" all three of them exclaimed happily.

XIV. Interesting Developments

January 9, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Thursday morning, Penny and I went to 500 West Jackson for a meeting about a newly requested module for *NIKA Legal 2004*, dubbed 'Trial Manager'. It was a significant upgrade of the trial management features which already existed in 'Case Manager', but with a focus on managing a trial minute to minute, including the ability to connect a laptop to a large monitor and display exhibits.

"Is this something you want to add in the first release?" Dave asked Cindi.

"The User Group requested it, and in their most recent release, Chickasaw Systems incorporated features that strongly indicate they're moving in that direction. That would give them a huge advantage. It will protect our flank if we could announce it as a feature."

"Vaporware, Cindi?" I asked with a smirk.

"Unlike Microsoft, we'll actually deliver it on time and on schedule! You know we don't do FUD!"

I chuckled, "Guess who is STILL easy to wind up twenty years later!"

"I'll wind you up, Buster!" she mock-threatened.

"Play nice, children!" Dave commanded, but he, too, was smiling. "He does have a point, Cindi. If you do announce it, we'll have to include it in Alpha, which is

set for August. Is seven months really enough time to design and deliver a version that is up to NIKA's standards?"

"I figure Steve and Penny could have a prototype by this afternoon!" she teased.

"I'm good, but I'm not *that* good!" I chuckled. "On a serious note, WiFi internet access isn't guaranteed to be available, and cellular modems are way too slow, so I see the biggest challenge as offline access and synchronizing with the server at the end of each day."

"Data merge is a difficult challenge," Brenda agreed. "Cindi, would it be acceptable to lock the records when they're checked out on a laptop to take to court?"

"I don't see that as a problem, at least in the initial release," she replied. "And I think we could limit it to a single, specially configured laptop at first. In fact, perhaps it's one we sell as part of the system. Make it turnkey, and at the end of each day, connect via modem or wired network and synchronize the data."

"What about the hosted clients?" Larry Jefferson asked. "The ones who use the full desktop client should be fine because it's feature complete. But there's no local client to download and use the data for the browser-based hosted firms."

"That argues for the dedicated laptop," Brenda said. "I can't think of a reason that wouldn't work, given the full API is available to the client-based hosted firms. Steve?"

"It'll take a bit of work to create that standalone system, but it will work. I'm concerned about the deadline."

"So am I," Alonzo said. "Cindi, if you want this feature in the 2004 release, I'm going to need at least two more software engineers."

"There's also the support concern," Dave said. "We'll need to discuss it with John Kyle because if something were to go wrong mid-trial, there would be hell to pay if we couldn't get them up and running."

"That's a big concern," I said. "Cindi, I know you know your job, but this has to be very carefully marketed and priced because our usual two- or four-hour response times aren't going to cut it."

"You're right," she said. "Could we at least create the design document and start working on this while I sort out the support challenges?"

"Yes," Julia said. "We can do that. I'll sit down with the team and the specs, and we'll develop at least a preliminary design document. I'd strongly advise not announcing until we know more. Anything else?"

Nobody had anything else, and the meeting broke up. Cindi pulled me aside.

"I usually don't ask you to pull rank," she said. "But I think this is vitally important."

"Let's see how things go," I said. "If you encounter serious pushback, take it to my sister, and she'll come to me for advice. But you need to be right, Cindi. You're betting our reputation on being able to support something we haven't even developed and which nobody else is doing."

She smiled, "So what else is new? That's been true since the day you asked me to work for you!"

I chuckled, "Good point."

"Are you going to the Executive Retreat in Boca on the 20th?"

"Yes. I had considered not going given my role, but Stephanie pointed out that I still do have the role as keeper of the NIKA «kami», and there are strategic discussions."

"This place would not be the same without you, even in your current role."

"I don't plan to leave anytime soon."

"Good!"

We exchanged a quick hug and I returned to my office in the NIKA building, where I had a productive day. At 4:15, I left the office to head to Caribou to meet Shaye.

"Hi!" Shaye said when I walked in.

"Hi! Same as last time?"

"Hot chocolate for sure!" she replied.

I placed our orders, paid for my coffee and Shaye's cocoa, and once the barista had made our drinks, we took them to the same table where we'd sat on Monday.

"How long before Deanna shows up?" I asked with a smile

Shaye laughed softly, "Oh, she would, but not for that reason! She said she'd fuck you if I wasn't interested!"

"Good to know," I chuckled.

"I did convey your request, but she wasn't sure how her patron would respond."

"You know his name, right? Jonathan Kane of Clermont Capital, from Goshen, Ohio, just a hop, skip, and a jump from where Deanna and I grew up. No need to be cagey or circumspect."

"If you know all that, why not just call him?"

"It's a long story, but the short version is I'm too close to the young woman who runs a rival investment firm where he used to work."

"The daughter of the guy who was busted for videotaping himself having sex with underage girls?"

"One and the same."

"And they each ended up with a million bucks! For something they all wanted to do!"

"Well, that answers that question," I said with a smile.

"Which?"

"Whether or not we have compatible worldviews."

"You mean not freaking out about fifteen-year-old girls having sex?"

"That usually indicates sanity in this increasingly insane, puritanical society."

"Well, given I was fifteen my first time and the guy was a Senior at UofI, I can't be a hypocrite."

"Another good sign. Hypocrisy is very much a bright line for me."

"You won't find many virgins among girls who were into drama or art in High School," Shaye smirked. "But in line with your comment before, I've seen a significant change just since Freshman year."

"And getting worse. So, Alice, are you ready to go *Through the Looking-Glass*?"

"Lewis Carroll had to have been doing some seriously good drugs!" Shaye declared.

"Or simply a good imagination and a warped mind! I can relate!"

"So, no mind-altering substances?"

"Whisky and caffeine, but I'm careful about both. Otherwise, no."

"Health nut?"

"You haven't answered the question as to 'red pill' or 'blue pill' or, if you prefer, journeying into the Twilight Zone."

"Your life is really that weird?"

"Let's just say that whenever someone asks, 'Could it get any weirder?' it *always* does. Loki is always lurking!"

"I'll bite," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Just how weird?"

"Very. To answer your question about being a health nut, yes, but not in the way you mean. I have a minor hormonal imbalance, which requires me to be very careful about sugar and complex carbs. It means I also have to be careful about

alcohol and caffeine, but it doesn't require me to be teetotal or only drink decaf. I run most days and practice karate. I'm licensed as 錬士 ('Renshi'), a Polished Instructor. I hold 6th Dan, which is a Master rank for instructors."

"6th degree black belt?"

"Yes, though the correct term is 'Dan'."

"I bet you have amazing stamina!"

"Something for you to judge should we get there."

"So, spill on the weird!"

"I told you I was married to a medical doctor who is an Attending trauma surgeon at UofC hospital. That is true, but *we*, and I mean *we*, are married to two other women; one has a PhD in chemistry, teaches at UofC, and is involved in polymer research. The other is pre-law at UofC. I have two kids by each of the first two, two by a friend from High School who is not part of our polyamorous marriage, and one by my High School girlfriend who came out as lesbian in college. I also have two live-in girlfriends."

"That's WAY beyond anything I might have imagined! All of that is true?"

I nodded and pulled my wallet from my pocket, took out the plastic photo holder, and handed it to Shaye. I named each person and their relation as she flipped through the photos, Shaye shaking her head the entire time.

"I don't even know what to say!"

"That is the usual response. And I have freedom to manage my sex life within a set of fairly wide boundaries, with the caveat that STI tests are required. I've had a vasectomy, so birth control isn't a concern."

"Make it weirder!"

I chuckled, "My views on raising children is that they are independent, thinking individuals who have the right to govern their own lives within very broad parameters. All of my children make most of their own decisions and have since they were toddlers. And that governs everything in their lives. My children, if they so choose, may have overnight guests of the opposite sex. Or the same sex, if that's their thing."

"My parents would have completely lost their minds if I'd asked to have Rob spend the night!"

"My mom, too, but fortunately, my girlfriend had hippie flower children for parents. She was born while they were living in a commune. I was allowed to stay at her house as a teenager, and on one occasion, we came down to dinner completely nude."

Shaye laughed, "OK, OK! You've made it weird! Anything else?"

"I've deflowered over a hundred and fifty young women."

"NO FUCKING WAY!" Shaye gasped.

"Actually, exactly that way!" I chuckled.

Shaye laughed, "Cute. OK, weird AND crazy! Can I ask something?"

"My life is mostly an open book."

"First, how old were you?"

"Fourteen; she was twenty-three."

"Jesus! Luckiest fourteen-year-old on the planet!"

"Pretty much, though I've had my share of heartache and pain."

"Bad breakups?"

"Only one, really. Some people very close to me have died very young, including a girlfriend who died when we were fifteen."

"Holy shit!"

"Yeah. She died in a boating accident in Sweden. My college girlfriend died of cancer when she was twenty-four, though she had married another guy by then. My best guy friend died at the hands of a drunk driver when he was twenty-seven, and that accident nearly claimed my wife's life as well. The husband of a girl who was my best friend in High School was murdered while serving in the Navy. Add in my mentor, though he was advanced in age, my mother-in-law dying on a plane on 9-11, and the aforementioned hippie dad dying of a stroke at a relatively young age, and it's pretty intense."

"Wow," she breathed, shaking her head in disbelief. "That's beyond anything I can even imagine."

"It's not all bad -- I started a very successful company with five friends right after college graduation, I have an amazing group of friends, I've traveled all over the world, and I can, with a few limits, do pretty much whatever I want."

"What limits, if it's OK to ask."

"I don't have Samantha Spurgeon or Jonathan Kane money, but short of buying a pro sports team or my own jet, I can afford to do anything I want to do, and my kids won't need to borrow for college."

"Where do you live?"

"Kenwood, just north of Hyde Park Avenue. You?"

"The dorm, though I sure wouldn't mind having a studio like the one Deanna had!"

"Unfortunately, I don't have a room that could be converted to a studio, but I think we're skipping ahead."

"Are we? I thought calling you to meet today pretty much telegraphed my decision."

"To be my friend? Sure. Beyond that? I never, ever make assumptions."

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't expect to get laid when you put the menu on the floor?"

"I didn't expect it to work to even get your number! I did it for Penny's benefit, to tease her!"

"OK, fine, but when I gave you my number?"

"I knew it was possible, maybe even likely, but I didn't assume. May I turn the tables?"

Shaye laughed, "In my experience, a girl who gives out her number expects to get laid! I knew, by the time I was fourteen, that every straight guy on the planet would fuck me if I offered. I'd say that's true for just about any girl who made the offer if the guy was even the least bit attracted to her, and probably even if he wasn't."

"That does reasonably describe the human condition for teenagers and college students!"

"Evidence suggests even married guys will usually fuck anyone who offers. Monogamy is not a human strong suit, though some people manage serial monogamy."

"No argument here, as nearly everyone I know has had more than one sex partner."

"I have to ask -- how did a fourteen-year-old seduce a twenty-three-year-old?"

"He didn't! He was sent by his mom to do yardwork for a widow whose husband had been killed in Vietnam. She thought he was a few years older, and when she discovered he was younger than she thought, she decided she was still interested. They had a brief, torrid affair, but then she ended it so he wouldn't become too attached to her. He was a bit disappointed, but that was the beginning of his sexual odyssey. Will you share?"

"Our next-door neighbors rented a room to a college student every year. It had been a girl the previous four years, but then a hunky Senior moved in. I started sunbathing in the backyard and caught him looking at me a few times. After a couple of weeks, I bought a bikini to replace the one-piece. That really got his attention, and one day, he said the bikini looked really good on me, but he thought it would look better on the floor next to his bed."

"So you're a sucker for corny lines!"

"Obviously, given I said we should find out! We slept together until he graduated and moved to Texas for work. Starting Junior year, I hung out with the drama club and art club and did what artists and thespians do; then I graduated and came to Chicago. I was surprised at the slim pickings at school, and being nineteen, I can't go to bars. I've had a few dates, but nobody worth my time. I've had guys try to pick me up at the café, but I've never gone for it until you."

"The corny line?"

"It made me think of Rob, and unless the vibe is totally wrong, you're fantastic in bed."

"What do you paint?"

"I haven't settled on a personal style or a single medium. Everything from watercolor landscapes to oil on canvas portraits. I've toyed with cubism and surrealism, as well as abstract. I've also done some woodblock pieces in the style of *Octopuses and the Ama girl* as well as egg tempura in the style of Byzantine icons."

"I have an affinity for all things Japanese and for Byzantine icons. When we finish here, let me take you to my office, and you can see what I mean."

"'Will you walk into my parlour?' said the Spider to the Fly," Shaye smirked.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I thought that was obvious! But before I answer, what are you looking for?"

"Subversives," I said. "People who reject social norms and the status quo and who want to effect change."

"Artists and thespians fit that bill."

"They do, but mostly, their politics don't mesh. I'm an unreconstructed capitalist and believe individual liberty is the foundation of a free society. I find too many Marxists in fine and performing arts and in academia. Those in academia are a driving force in the closing of the American mind, as well as the infantilization of teens and young adults."

"And what happens when you find these subversives?"

"Why, they join my subversive revolutionary cell!" I chuckled. "There are two chapters, both here in Chicago, one on the South Side and one on the North Side. The chapters meet twice a month and discuss just about any topic you can imagine. They used to be called 'rap sessions', and started in 1981 with some friends in my apartment, and grew into what we now call 'Philosophy Club', which then separated into the two chapters."

"Are you purposefully avoiding the obvious?"

"Sex? I thought that was a given in your mind. If that's all you want, then, believe it or not, I'd likely decline despite you hitting my sweet spot of red hair, green eyes, and athletic body."

"Hang on! If I just want to fuck, you'd say 'no'?"

"As Jules Winfield said, 'I'm in a transitional period. In the past, fucking just to fuck was something I did, though mostly it was about bonding; well, and deflowering virgins. These days, it would be the exception, not the rule."

Remember, I wasn't actually trying to pick you up, though it did work out that way. Will you answer my question?"

"Besides the obvious? Deanna encouraged me to find a patron, and you might fit the bill."

"Then the thing for you to do is come to Philosophy Club on Sunday, meet my wives, and hang out with us for a few hours afterwards. You'll get a fuller picture of the circus you might join. I'll want to see some of your work, obviously, and if we all agree, we'll work out the details. As I said, sex is not a *quid pro quo*."

"But you are interested in sex, right?"

"As I said, sweet spot in terms of looks. You have the right personality, and I'm positive you'll be a fun partner. But, again, it's not required for a friendship or even a patronage relationship."

"This is surreal," Shaye observed.

"You're not the first person to say that. Want to see my office?"

"What the Hell? Why not?"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Hi, Mrs. Jones," I said when Chelsea and I arrived at Maggie's house on Thursday afternoon.

"Hi, Matt. Hi, Chelsea. Matt, Maggie wanted to talk to you privately."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I said.

"Normally, I'd agree with you, but she won't tell us what happened, and I thought maybe she'd tell you."

"You should, Matt," Chelsea said. "I trust you."

"I know," I replied. "And I appreciate it. It's just that..."

"Just listen to what she has to say," Chelsea suggested. "It's not as if anything bad can happen from that."

"Chelsea is making a good point," Mrs. Jones said. "And it's not your fault. I should never have allowed her to be in drama."

I didn't think drama was the problem; I was the problem. Maggie was in love with me, and there was literally nothing I could do about that because I was committed to Chelsea. I had absolutely no intention of changing that because I was sure our future was together, as husband and wife, with at least two kids. I was singularly uninterested in anything like my dad's situation, even if Chelsea somehow would agree, which she wouldn't.

"I guess," I said reluctantly.

"She's in the basement," Mrs. Jones said. "Chelsea can stay with me."

I nodded, kissed Chelsea, then went down the steps to the basement rec room. I saw Maggie curled up on the couch with a blanket pulled over her.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Yes. They made me go to the hospital because I ran away, but nothing bad happened."

"Where were you?"

"One of the girls who is a member of my church goes to Uoff. I took the Amtrak from Naperville. I was in her dorm, but the RA wouldn't let me stay any longer. I was trying to figure out what to do when the cops came up and said they were looking for me."

"How did they know you were there?"

"I think the RA called the campus police, but I don't know for sure."

"Why did you run away?"

"You know," she said almost inaudibly.

"Because of how you feel about me?"

"I love you, Matt, and I can't stop thinking about kissing you and what it would be like to...to...make love with you."

"Whatever else is true," I said, "I know you want to be a virgin on your wedding night."

"But I can't stop thinking about it," Maggie protested. "And I love you."

"I don't know what you want me to do," I said. "You know Chelsea and I are basically engaged."

"I know...but...but...I wish you were my boyfriend."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I want to help you, but I can't do that."

"Then just go," she said. "Go."

"Maggie, I'm concerned."

"Not enough. Go."

I thought about staying, but I realized that at the moment I couldn't help. I left the basement and went back upstairs.

"Maggie needs to speak to a counselor," I said to Mrs. Jones. "The school has a psychologist on staff."

"Psychology is simply a way to excuse sin," Mrs. Jones said. "Our pastor and his wife counsel the congregation."

"I don't think that's going to work at this point," I said. "She needs professional help."

"I know what's best for her," Mrs. Jones said. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing, really, other than she went to be with a girl who used to go to your church, and the Resident Advisor wouldn't let her stay longer. Somebody, probably the RA, called the police. Please get her some professional help."

"We'll handle this, Matt. Thank you for coming over."

I knew arguing with Mrs. Jones wouldn't get me anywhere, so Chelsea and I said 'goodbye' and left Maggie's house.

"What did Maggie say?" Chelsea asked once we'd reached the sidewalk.

"That she's in love with me and wants to go to bed with me," I said.

"And do you want to be with her?" Chelsea asked.

"No! Why would you think that?"

"I don't know," Chelsea sighed.

"I love you! We're going to get married and have kids and grandkids! I don't want Maggie. I want you. You know that! There is literally nothing that can come between us!"

"I'm sorry I'm insecure."

"So long as you love me and remember I love you, everything will be fine."

"I do."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

"Care to share why your office is fully Japanese, right down to the «tatami» mats?" Sheye asked.

"I finally grew up when I spent five weeks in Japan in 1994. That's also when I received my teaching license."

"Grew up?"

"Perhaps 'found myself' is a better term. I spent most of the time either in quiet contemplation or working in the compound of the master of our karate school. Think Daniel-san in *The Karate Kid*. I even painted a fence and waxed a car the last full day I was there."

Shaye laughed, "Too funny. Who painted the cherry blossom mural?"

"Siobhán Callaghan, who has a studio down in Hyde Park. She paints multiple styles, gives art classes, and also does some home decor detail painting. I've bought a few paintings from her and commissioned some others, and she painted borders in the bedrooms in my house."

"Family portraits?"

"Yes, but also a nude of my wife, the chemistry professor."

"She's beautiful enough to be a model!"

"I agree!"

"Did you design this room?"

"One of my employees did, including sourcing all the Japanese items from Japan. She knew my affinity for Japan and decided to do this."

"What style is your house?"

"Mostly Scandinavian modern, complete with a sauna in the basement. I spent a year in Sweden as an exchange student."

"I'd love to travel. Where have you been?"

"Australia, Singapore, Japan, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Canada, most US states, England, the Netherlands, Germany, East Germany, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Russia, both when it was the USSR and after."

"Business or personal?"

"A mix of both."

"So you've been all kinds of places and laid all kinds of girls?" she asked with a smirk.

"Yes, but I don't play an instrument, and you do NOT want to hear me sing! So, what do you think?"

"I think I'll take you up on your offer of coming to your house on Sunday."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Good."



January 10, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Friday morning, just before 9:00am, *adium* chimed to let me know I had a message.

PrincessEmma: Hi! It's Emma!

NIKASteve: Hi! Princess?

PrincessEmma: Blame my dad! He set up my IM account when he moved to Chicago!

NIKASteve: How did things go with your mom?

PrincessEmma: I think she was relieved. I'm really looking forward to June!

NIKASteve: Me, too! How much does your dad know?

PrincessEmma: You're going to be my karate instructor and mentor. When I saw Mrs. Spencer, she just smirked.

NIKASteve: Of COURSE she did! Melanie came by being a smart aleck naturally!

PrincessEmma: I'm sure your kids do, as well!

NIKASteve: Obviously!

PrincessEmma: Time for me to leave for school! L8r!

NIKASteve: L8r!

I was just about to go back to work when Kimmy let me know Dante was on the line.

"Morning," I said. "Or afternoon, for you."

"It's a beautiful sunny day here in Jo'burg! Got another company for you to check out."

"Where and what?"

"A startup performance car company."

"Well, 'startup' rules out one in Maranello, Italy," I chuckled.

"In my dreams! This one is in the Netherlands. I'm acquainted with one of the founders, and he's looking for some additional capital."

"Not that I'm objecting to a trip to the Netherlands, but if you know the guy, and it's performance cars, shouldn't you be doing the analysis?"

"I want a second opinion from an unbiased third party. You do that with your doctors, and I know you do that with legal counsel!"

"True. It'll have to be after GlucoTech. Would late February or early March work?"

"That would be OK. I know you have other things going on."

"Let me figure out the dates, and I'll send you an email. Are there any dates which don't work for them?"

"No. They'll work around anything else they have."

"Will a day be enough?"

"It should be. I'll send the details to your secure fax. I take it you'll take some time in Amsterdam?"

"Hopefully, I can see some friends. I'll let you know as soon as I work it out."

"Thanks!"

He disconnected the call without saying 'goodbye' as was his wont, and I placed the handset back in the cradle.

"What's in Maranello, Italy?" Penny asked.

"Ferrari. Dante said he's looking to invest in a performance car company, and you know his affinity for the 'Prancing Horse'!"

"Almost as much as for pussy!"

I chuckled, "He's married and settled down. She has him on a fairly tight leash, and he's not straining at it!"

"She must be almost as good as I am!" Penny teased.

"Not a high bar," I retorted.

I bobbed and weaved, and managed to duck or bat away the Nerf balls thrown at me.

"After a statement like that, you have to let me prove it!" Penny declared fiercely.

"in your dreams, Mrs. Penfield!"

"I should give Terry a hall pass for Birgit!"

"No, you shouldn't! And not because of Birgit, but because of you and Terry. Don't repeat past mistakes, young lady."

"Oh, now it's all 'young lady' and 'Dad mode'!"

"What-ever!" I chuckled. "Don't you have work to do?"

Penny rolled her eyes and turned back to her keyboard. Kimmy came in with the fax from Dante, and I checked my calendar. The first weekend in March seemed best, as that was a weekend Jesse's team would have off if they advanced. I made a note to get in touch with Karla, Sari, and Hans and decided I'd stay a week, giving me ample time to see my friends. I could always change my return flight if nobody was available, but I loved Amsterdam, so I'd probably stay the entire week. I certainly had plenty of vacation time, and so long as I took my laptop with me, I could work if I had downtime.

I hadn't seen either Karla or Sari for some time, but we exchanged cards a few times a year, and Sari had called the two times she'd had layovers in Chicago, though I hadn't been available. She was primarily working flights to Indonesia, so US trips were rare. Hans and I exchanged emails reasonably regularly. He was retired and doing volunteer work teaching computers to High School kids and taking occasional consulting engagements.

I placed a call to Liesel to confirm Business Class tickets were available on KLM for those flights, and she put in the reservations. She also reserved a junior suite for me at the InterContinental Amstel in Amsterdam, using my Six Continents Club membership for the upgrade from a standard room. All of that confirmed, I sent an email to Dante with the proposed dates. Just fifteen minutes after I'd sent it, I received a reply saying that my meeting was set for Monday, March 3, at 9:00 in Zeewolde, located in Flevoland, a new province reclaimed from the former Zuiderzee.

I had an email address for Hans Oostrum, so I sent him a quick note saying I'd be in the Netherlands, then called the number I had for Karla Timmer, reaching her answering machine. I left a message for her, then repeated the same with Sari Onbekend. The last thing I did before going back to work was text my wives to let them know of the travel plans.

 Jesse

With school having started, the entire gang was back for Friday nights, and there was a surprise as Adi was allowed to join us. It turned out that her dad had spoken with Zaida's dad and agreed that with two Muslim girls and one Muslim guy, Ahmed, a student from the Lab School, it was OK for Adi to join us. A few minutes after Birgit and I arrived at Giordano's, Angelina came into the restaurant.

"Interesting developments," Libby whispered.

I shrugged and sat down next to Luna, and Zahra sat next to me, with Zaida next to her, while Libby sat down next to Luna. The pizza was excellent, and once we finished eating, we headed to the theatre to see *Just Married*. As we walked, Adi came up next to me.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi! Your dad relented?"

"Partly. I'm allowed to come out with the group, but only if I'm always with Zaida."

"That's better than nothing!"

"It is. I want to come to the Hangouts, but I don't think I should ask."

"Probably not. Let him get used to this, and perhaps he'll relent a bit further. I am glad you're allowed to come out with us."

"I'll be at your game tomorrow with Zahra and Zaida. My dad is coming along with their dads."

Lunch was NOT going to be fun, but I knew how to talk to the men to keep things from spiraling out of control.

"We're always happy to have more people to cheer!"

We arrived at the theater, bought our tickets, and I sat between Luna and Zahra again, with Zaida and Adi taking the next two seats. Brittany Murphy and Ashton Kutcher were great together, and all of us laughed a lot at the story of newlyweds on their honeymoon in Europe. When the movie ended, the three Muslim girls had to go straight home while the rest of us went to get ice cream.

"Can we talk?" Angelina asked after we both had our ice cream.

"What about lunch on Sunday?"

"OK. The diner by the hospital at 12:30pm? That gives me enough time to get there from church."

"Sure."



January 11, 2003, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

"Men, this is it!" Coach Nelson said. "Play intelligent hockey! Forwards, pass sharply and smartly and use good shot selection, but shoot the puck!"

Defensemen, watch the passing lanes, and don't let anyone get a straight run at Jesse. Jesse, stand tall, play smart, and make sure you protect the five-hole. What do you say, men?"

"RAH!" everyone shouted.

We left the locker room and went onto the ice to begin our warmups for our game against Chicago Latin. We were absolutely ready for this game, and so long as we followed Coach's guidance, I was confident we'd win. As I skated, I looked up in the stands and saw my moms, my dad, my dad's girlfriends, and my brothers and sisters. In addition, I saw most of the softball team and others, including Zahra, Zaida, and Adi, who all had their dads with them.

Lunch, actually brunch, given the time, was going to be interesting, but I put that out of my mind and thought back to our previous game against Chicago Latin. They were a good team, and the first game had been a defensive struggle during the first period but then opened up in the second. Coach planned for an all-out assault, and intended to mix things up, putting our second line on the ice first for a short stint, to get a defensive matchup with their second D-line.

Fifteen minutes later, after warmups and a quick pep talk by Coach, he put the plan into action, catching the Chicago Latin coach off guard. He tried to swap his lines, but the referee was ready to drop the puck, and there was no way he could do it without taking a considerable risk. The strategy worked, and we got our first goal just seventy-two seconds into the game.

The stoppage after the goal allowed the Chicago Latin coach to synchronize his defensive lines by double-shifting, and the game settled into a hard-fought end-to-end struggle. I made six saves, and the Chicago Latin goalie made eight, and the period ended 1-0.

"Good defense, guys," I said to Freddy and the other defensemen. "You didn't give them any clear shots. That makes life SO much easier!"

We all hydrated, changed t-shirts, then headed back to the ice for the second period, which didn't go nearly as well, as we took two penalties to only one by Chicago Latin, and they scored on one of the powerplays to bring the score to 1-1 after two periods.

"Dumb penalty, Paul!" I said. "Don't retaliate!"

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Sorry."

The third period was really tough, with Chicago Latin getting ten shots, two of which I barely fought off. Fortunately, with just forty seconds to go, Freddy snapped a pass to a streaking Nicholas, who skated in on the Chicago Latin goalie on a breakaway. Nicholas deked left, drew the puck back right, and slid it past the sprawling keeper. That led to a frenetic final thirty-five seconds of six-on-five, with two good shots, one of which Freddy blocked and one I turned away just at the buzzer, giving us a 2-1 victory.

 Steve

"Good morning, Sensei!" Avanti exclaimed when she walked into the dojo after driving straight there from the ice rink after Jesse's team had won their first playoff game.

"How was your vacation?"

"Hawai'i was great, but I missed coming to class for two full weeks!"

"Well, the dojo was closed one of those weeks," I said. "Will you be at Philosophy Club tomorrow?"

"Yes. Are we having our time together after this afternoon's class?"

"Yes. Take your place, please."

She moved to line up, and I went to the locker room and quickly changed, then stepped into the viewing area where Anala was standing.

"Is everything OK for the 24th?" I asked.

"Yes," Anala said with a twinkle in her eye. "Prajesh and I are leaving on the 24th for a long weekend in Kohler. Avanti has permission to be at your house, so long as she's home when we arrive home, which is the evening of the 27th. I expect her guru to properly educate her."

I chuckled, "Given she's your daughter, it's more likely I'll be the one educated!"

Anala laughed softly, "You might have a point! But in all seriousness, you are the man I hoped you would become."

"Thank you. Any regrets?"

"About you? None at all."

"But about something else?"

Anala nodded, "When I started seeing you, there was a guy I was seeing, purely platonically, and I basically started ignoring him. It's my one true regret. I ruined an excellent friendship because I was so focused on you."

"I think rekindling our friendship says it's never too late. If he's still in Chicago, call him. Heck, if he's not in Chicago and you know where he is, call him. What's the worst thing that can happen? I'm certainly happy we restored our friendship, and happy you're attending our Philosophy Club meetings."

"So am I! I assume it's OK to spend time with Kara this afternoon while you and Avanti have your mentoring session?"

"Of course! She's expecting you. And now, I see I'm getting the evil eye from Will!"

"Go practice!"

I smiled, moved to the practice room, and took my position just as Ashley was called to lead meditation and exercises.

XV. I Don't Know

January 11, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Jesse Block, this is my dad, Jamaal Rahim," Zahra said. "And this is Zaida's dad, Muhammad Khaled."

"Pleased to meet you both," I said. ""«As-salāmu ‘alaykum», Jamaal Rahim and Muhammad Khaled." ("Peace be unto you.")

"«Wa ‘alaykumu s-salām», Jesse," Jamaal Rahim replied. ("And peace be unto you, too.")

"You speak Arabic?" Muhammad asked.

"I know only a few phrases," I replied. "But I learned the proper greeting from Amir Khan."

"Zahra has said you are very respectful!" Mr. Rahim observed. "We would like to take you to lunch. There is a «halal» restaurant one block east of the karate school where your father teaches."

"I'd be honored," I said. "What time shall we meet?"

"11:30am, if that's OK with you."

"More than," I said. "That's about two hours, so it's plenty of time for me to put my gear away and do my chores."

"Then we will see you there,"

They left, and Nicholas and I headed out to Aunt Kara's SUV, which was so much better for hauling my goalie gear than either of my moms' cars or my dad's BMW.

"Jesse?" Simone called out, coming up to us.

"Hi! What's up?"

"Are you busy this afternoon?"

"I'm meeting some people for lunch, and I don't know how long it'll be, then I have a date."

"OK. I suppose I'll see you Monday after school."

She left, Nicholas and I loaded our gear into the SUV, then got in to head home.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Michael

"No Andi?" Manuel asked when he, Darius, and Kevin arrived at my house on Saturday morning.

"She was getting the wrong idea!" I declared.

"If you mean what I think you mean," Darius said, "that is *never* the wrong idea!"

He was Junior, and was sixteen and had a girlfriend.

"Too complicated," I said. "It was cool being friends, but now she made it clear she wants to kiss, and if we do that, it could totally mess up our friendship **and** robotics. Not to mention, I am not ready for a girlfriend. Matt was, but I'm not."

"So just be 'friends with benefits!'" Kevin, a Sophomore who was fifteen, said. "I'd hit that for sure!"

"You couldn't hit a barn with a baseball from five feet away!" Manuel teased.

"How about we just play video games?" I suggested. "We have two computers in the basement, plus I can borrow Matthew's laptop. Darius has his with him, so that gives us four."

"*Age of Empires*?" Kevin asked.

"Or *Anno 1602*," I suggested. "I like it better, actually."

"Minus the whole 'your people want chocolate' whining!" Darius said.

"Yeah, that's annoying," I agreed. "They can get their own chocolate!"

"Let's play *Anno*," Manuel said.

I went to Matthew's room to borrow his laptop, then the four of us went to the basement, where I plugged the laptops into the network switch, and everyone sat down to play.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

I walked to the restaurant, wondering just how hard the two men were going to press me on talking to Imam Iqbal. It wasn't that I minded talking to him; it was that it might well lead to Zahra being told not to see me at all. I really liked her, and of all the girls I hung out with, only Luna came close. Well, there was Libby, but she was in a totally different category now that we weren't fooling around together.

I tried to work out which of my two main options had the best chance of success, even if that chance was slight. I also didn't want to mess up Birgit's homework group or her Girl Gang, but I wasn't sure that was possible. In the end, I felt agreeing to speak to Imam Iqbal had a slightly better chance of success than politely declining.

When I arrived at Ali's Shawarma Grill, I saw Zahra, Zaida, and their dads sitting at a round table, so I walked to join them. I totally wasn't surprised that the empty chair was between the two men, with their daughters sitting to their right or left.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello, Jesse," Mr. Rashid said. "Please sit."

"Thank you," I said.

The counterman came over to the table, took our orders, then began preparing them with an assistant. I hadn't been to this specific restaurant before, but I'd had Middle Eastern food several times with Yousef Khan, so I knew what I liked.

"I am not a hockey fan," Mr. Rashid said, "but the other men there said your team is one of the best in the city."

"This was a playoff game," I said. "We have two more in the group stage, then go to the knockout round, similar to football or cricket."

"I'm curious, why say 'football' when you clearly mean 'soccer'?" Mr. Khaled asked.

"That's what my friends and I call it because we follow the English Premier League and La Liga. We also watch games from Bundesliga, Serie A, and games from Central and South America. We refer to the NFL as 'gridiron' or 'American football'."

"And your career plans?" Mr. Rashid asked.

"I plan to get a business degree from UW-Madison and hopefully work for a hockey team or other sports team."

"Not play?"

"I am very good at my position, but as I've pointed out, there are more pilots on each US aircraft carrier than goalies in the NHL. The chances I could make the pros are pretty small, so I'm going to focus on my degree, play for the informal club team, and also coach if I can. I'll be coaching younger kids this Summer at hockey camp."

"Commendable. Your grades are good?"

"All A's," I replied.

It felt as if I was interviewing for a job, which, in the scheme of things, I probably was -- Zahra's husband. The problem was, of course, I didn't qualify, and I'd never qualify, as neither of us had any interest in changing our faith.

"I also understand you've visited the Mosque in Bridgeview."

"Yes, for the marriage of one of my dad's employees. He stood in for her father for all the preliminaries because her father is in Los Angeles."

"But your father is not a Muslim!" Mr. Khaled protested.

"That's true," I said, "but neither Imam Iqbal nor the imam in California objected. My dad met with both of them and while it was considered irregular, it was acceptable. When she moved to Chicago, he acted as her guardian until she married. And I'm sure you know my dad was good friends with Amir Khan and helped protect him from our government."

"Yes, we're all aware of that," Mr. Rashid said. "Zahra says you are a faithful Christian."

"I'm Eastern Orthodox," I said. "We have churches and monasteries in the Middle East, and three of our Patriarchs are there; well, the Ecumenical Patriarch is in Istanbul, but the others are in Damascus and Jerusalem. As far as I'm aware, there is a good relationship."

"I believe that is true in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. But you understand that is not enough, right?"

"Zahra and I are friends," I said. "I understand that she has to marry a Muslim man, and I want to eventually marry an Orthodox woman or someone who will convert. I respect her and your tradition, and would hope you would continue to allow her to join us on Friday evenings. Zaida usually comes along, as does Adi binti Mussa, and Ali and Jamal, two Muslim boys. We're all friends."

"And that is commendable, but Zahra has expressed an interest in you to her mother."

I was annoyed that we were talking about Zahra while she was sitting there, but there wasn't much I could do about it. Ultimately, though, I felt it was fruitless and decided to simply lay my cards on the table.

I nodded, "I understand, and I respect your faith, but I'm a believing, practicing Christian. I've listened to what Imam Iqbal has to say, and I've read an English translation of the Qur'an, but my faith is different and is recognized as *Ahl al-kitāb*. That would, if the genders were reversed, permit a marriage, but not for us." ("People of the Book")

"You are remarkably well-informed," Mr. Khaled observed. "And very respectful."

"Unfortunately," Mr. Rashid said as our food arrived, "that is not enough."

We began eating, and I saw that Zahra was very sad, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. We had a polite conversation about football, hockey, and school, but it was obvious what the outcome of the lunch would be. When we finished, I thanked the men for lunch and exchanged a look with Zahra that said I sympathized. I wondered if I should say something about Birgit but felt I might do more harm than good.

I bade everyone 'goodbye', left the restaurant, then headed home to get ready for my date with Missy, who I'd have to pick up from her dad's house in Oak Park.

 Steve

"Is something bothering you?" Avanti asked as we sat side-by-side in leather wingback chairs after my private karate lesson.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Something about your *Ātman* has changed."

"I'm not saying you aren't right, but what is it you discern that's different?"

"What you call your vibe, or what the Chinese call *qi*, is different from the last time I saw you."

"Some things happened since I returned from California on Christmas Eve morning."

"Is it anything you can share?"

"None of it really affects you," I said.

"I believe it does," Avanti said. "If your heart is in a different place, that could change things."

"Very perceptive," I said. "You are absolutely your mother's daughter."

Avanti laughed, "As if anything else were possible! Jesse and Birgit are absolutely your kids! I know you are the guru, and I am the student, but I think it is in the best interest of our relationship for you to share."

I considered her request and decided, in the interest of true intimacy, that I could share.

"I know I don't have to say this, but I will, just so there are no misunderstandings -- everything we discuss is completely confidential."

"I would never violate your confidence," Avanti said firmly. "And I know you believe that, or our plans for later this month would have been called off. They aren't, are they?"

"Nothing has changed in that regard," I replied. "On Christmas Eve day, there was a surprising revelation -- I have a half-brother from my dad's first marriage, a marriage of which I was unaware. That revelation caused more than a small amount of consternation because my mom doesn't know. The details aren't important, and I seriously doubt that's what you sensed had changed."

"Your *Ātman* is unsettled, though I don't think that's the sole cause or even the most important one. "

"Very perceptive. The genesis of my unsettled *Ātman* would be a series of relationships that began about six years ago and culminated a week ago when a young woman left here disappointed."

"Well, unless my mom is lying about sexual intimacy with you being sublime, that means you turned her down."

"Again, very perceptive. She was a referral from a referral from a referral and had a pair of fantasies she wanted to be fulfilled. One of them was extremely enticing - the virginal babysitter seducing the dad when he drove her home. The other, which involved light bondage, was outside my comfort zone."

"I understood that was in your comfort zone."

"Your mom is quickly moving into the same zone as Penny!" I chuckled. "And while light bondage is OK within an intimate relationship, what the young woman wanted was to be tied up and ravished and lose her virginity in the process. To me, without the intimate relationship, that was too close to a rape

fantasy, and I expressed my discomfort. I did offer to fulfill the other one, but she declined and left disappointed and unhappy."

"I think I can see both sides," Avanti said, "but with no actual relationship, I absolutely understand why you would decline."

"The situation was further exacerbated because when she left here, I put her in a taxi to take her to Union Station, but she ended up in Lincoln Park and disappeared. I know she made her own decision, whatever it was, but I feel some responsibility for what happened."

"Is she missing?"

"Yes. I heard from her friend, as well as the police, but given there is incontrovertible proof she left here in a taxi and was dropped off in Lincoln Park, nothing came of the police inquiry."

"She was over the age of consent?"

"Twenty," I replied.

"Has that affected your thinking about what Mom called 'dalliances'?"

"Yes, in that I've decided not to act on referrals, though, as with any rule, there is room for exceptions in special circumstances."

"Like me?" Avanti asked.

"Yes, like you. Kara suggested that six or seven hours isn't material, so we can begin as soon as you arrive on Friday the 24th."

Avanti smiled, "I'll thank her when I speak to her. It was your intent that we attend both karate training sessions on Saturday, correct?"

"Yes. That evening is Guys' Night and Girls' Night Out, and I think it makes sense if you hang out with Birgit while I play poker. Anything else risks discovery."

"That's fine, of course. You're the guru, so it's up to you."

"I'm getting old, so a rest will help!" I chuckled.

Avanti laughed softly, "And yet, you will be invigorated by imbibing of my essence, just as I will in yours."

"There are no plans for Sunday other than our weekly family dinner, and I have Monday off work. I'll ensure you're home by 4:00pm on Monday so there are no questions from your dad."

"He would only object to my choice of lover, not to taking a lover."

"Which is exactly the reason to not raise any questions. Will you and your mom be here tomorrow for Philosophy Club?"

"Yes, that's the plan."

"We'll have several new attendees, including some 'graduating' from Jesse's and Birgit's Hangout. I think that means we're close to forming a third group, as Becka said their attendance is up to twenty-two. That's something I'll need to discuss with Suzane, Natalie, and Jackson."

"Your chief advisors?"

"With regard to Philosophy Club, yes. I do discuss other things with them, but it's mainly about Philosophy Club. They played a bigger role in the past, but now that my marriage has stabilized and is in its final configuration, my wives provide the best advice."

"Mom used to do that for you, right?"

"Yes, and she was a huge help, though I didn't internalize much of what she taught me. That finally happened when I spent five weeks in Japan at Dojo Hisakawa Hiro. It could be successfully argued that is when I finally grew up."

"Men do seem to take much longer to mature than women, both physically and mentally."

"I think at least part of the mental delay is social conditioning," I said. "My boys are basically as mature as my girls."

"Your family situation is unique, though I would say my brother is more mature than most of his friends."

"which makes sense, given your who your parents are. Your dad is much more socially conservative but does not appear to disagree with your mom on core values."

"If that had been the case, they would never have married. Of course, if you had been willing to be Hindu, Mom would have married you, but then I would not exist!"

"Even setting aside that unfortunate consequence, your mom and I are both where we need to be. The only regret is that we were out of touch for an extended period of time, mainly because your dad is uncomfortable with the

situation at the Compound. That said, nothing prevented me from staying in touch with your mom."

"And yet, you did, when the time was right, and when I needed you to come into her life."

"I'm curious: what would you have done if that had not happened?"

"Asks the man who refuses to answer 'What if?' questions!"

I chuckled, "Yeah, well..."

"More than likely, I would have waited until I was seventeen, then sought out a well-regarded man in the Indian community as my guru. Of course, things didn't go exactly as planned, as you know I had hoped to consummate our relationship nearly a year ago."

"And yet, I believe we made the right decision."

"I do as well. Achieving true intimacy is the key to sublime physical pleasure."

"I agree."

 Birgit

Tomás and Libby had come to the house after karate, and we'd spent two hours fooling around, but then Tomás had something to do with his family, so Libby and I left the house together to meet the Girl Gang plus some school friends at Starbucks.

"What's bugging you, Birgit?" Libby asked as we walked.

"I don't know," I replied. "Just something feels 'off'."

"You mean with Tomás? Or me? Or both of us?"

"That's just it; I'm not sure. What did you notice that made you ask?"

"You weren't your usual self when we were fooling around. It was more like you were going through the motions. I don't think Tomás noticed, but he's a boy, and they aren't exactly the most clued-in on the planet. What's wrong?"

"I have no idea. It's absolutely not doing stuff with you if that concerns you."

"No, it doesn't. I mean, you were with Lilibeth before you were with a guy and with Marcella after you were with a guy, and you haven't been reluctant."

I giggled, "Me? Reluctant about having sex? About as soon as my dad is!"

"Actually, he's way more careful than I think you know," Libby observed. "You heard what Rachel said, and you know what I said."

"Are you saying I'm not careful enough?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure that's the way I'd put it. If something is off or missing, then you're doing something...suboptimally, I think that's a better word than 'wrong'. May I make an observation?"

"I just had my tongue in your pussy, and you had yours in mine, so I think you're entitled!"

Libby laughed, "When you put it that way, yeah! I think you want more than just fucking. I think that was obvious when Peter decided he wanted Julie as his

girlfriend. And then you were working on Philip, but he broke up with you because you weren't willing to limit yourself in any way. I'm not saying doing that was wrong in a moral sense, but maybe your goals are wrong. Or, perhaps, what you say are your goals aren't what you need. There is a difference."

"Maybe," I said.

"What's missing?" Libby asked. "You have a great family, great friends, a boy you personally trained to pleasure you, a girl who wants to fool around with you, and me who wants to have threesomes."

"You mean Lilibeth? Or someone else?"

"Lilibeth. She totally has the hots for you!"

"Sorry."

Libby laughed, "About what? I know Lilibeth and I aren't going to be long-term. It'll end when she goes back to Boston, if not before. Our life goals aren't compatible, but we enjoy each other's company. I totally wouldn't be upset if you guys were together."

"I'm not sure I want to be one-on-one with a girl," I said.

"What *do* you want, Birgit?"

"I actually have no idea," I admitted as we reached Starbucks.

 Steve

"Hi, Steve!" Allyson said when I walked up to the ER entrance. "Where are your other wives?"

"Suzanne is out with her friends, and Kara had a departmental dinner," I said.

"Does that mean you're available?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

I chuckled, "Where are your cohort in crime and Jessica?"

"Both changing. Jess just finished a grueling surgery on a gang banger who took three rounds to the abdomen, and Lucy just admitted an MVA. They'll be ten minutes, so I came out to chat when I saw you walk up. Big plans for tonight?"

"Nope. Just a quiet evening at home. You?"

"My usual Saturday night -- a warm blanket, a glass of wine, takeout, and Netflix!"

"When did you graduate medical school?" I asked.

Allyson laughed, "Nice way of asking how old I am! 1989."

"Age is a construct," I said. "My dad is almost twenty years older than my mom. You're in good shape at look great for *any* age."

"Flatterer! This bod has more than a few miles on it since I graduated High School!"

"Medical school and Residency will do that to you! But you're in good shape."

"Not as good as you! Jess says you run five or six times a week and train three or four times at your dojo?"

"Yes. But I'm starting to feel age creep up on my body, too. But so far, so good!"

"Men age MUCH more gracefully if they exercise," Allyson said. "Men in their fifties and sixties are considered 'handsome' and even 'sexy'. It's tough to find a woman who is sexy in her sixties!"

"Sexiness is in the eye of the beholder," I said.

"Maybe, but a woman in her fifties can't compete with one in her twenties!"

"Oh, I bet there are some! And ask Ben Franklin about that!"

Allyson laughed, "I remember reading he advised men to stay away from the young, sexy ones because they were immature, clingy, and demanding, while older women were mature and grateful for the attention!"

"Makes sense, doesn't it?" I asked as Jessica and Lucy came out of the ER.

"Hi, Tiger!" she exclaimed.

I held out my arms, and we hugged and exchanged a soft kiss.'

"Can anyone do that?" Allyson asked.

"Go for it, if you dare!" Jessica said with a silly smile. "He has a waiver!"

I laughed and rolled my eyes in the best Birgit fashion as Allyson presented herself for a hug and soft kiss, and then Lucy did the same.

"Tiger, do you mind if we invite the girls to dinner?"

"That's up to you," I said. "There's stew that Yuriko made and bread Ashley made. It was just going to be the two of us because everyone else is out, but there's plenty of food."

"Allyson, Lucy? Join us!" Jessica offered.

"They agreed, I took Jessica's hand, and we set off for the house."

 Jesse

I had picked up Missy, and we met Matthew, Chelsea, Mitch, and Fangsu at Bacino's on Wacker for pizza.

"That was a great game this morning," Matthew said.

"Thanks. Two more games in the group stage. Will you be there?"

"Not next weekend; we're going to Ohio. We'll be at the one after."

"What's in Ohio?" Mitch asked.

"We're going to see friends," Chelsea said. "Matt and I both have family there, too."

"Matthew, when's your next drama production?" I asked.

"It's *Fiddler on the Roof*, March 6th through 9th," Matthew replied. "Just let me know which night you're coming if you aren't coming with Dad."

"OK. I'll talk to my moms and see what they want to do and let you know. What role do you have?"

"Tevye."

"And Maggie is Golde?" Matthew asked.

"No. She doesn't have a part. She's had some personal problems and is dealing with them. Tara is going to be Golde."

"Do you get every lead role?" Missy asked.

"In musicals, pretty much."

"That's pretty cool! It seems like all your siblings are talented. What about your little brother?"

"Robotics club and computer club."

"So he takes after your dad, then?"

"I don't know about that," Matthew said. "Dad is a software guy, but Michael is more about hardware."

"What are we doing after dinner?" Fangsu asked.

"We wanted to see *Catch Me if You Can*," Chelsea said. "Birgit saw it and said it was pretty good."

Everyone agreed, and when we finished our pizza, we headed to the theatre.

 Steve

"How about a sauna?" Jessica asked after we finished dinner.

I almost laughed because I knew it was Jessica's way of teasing me.

"And do your co-workers know how we use the sauna?"

"We're all medical professionals, Tiger!"

I laughed, "And this is not a medical setting! I know for a *fact* doctors can be very sexy when they put their minds to it! I'll leave the decision to the three of you."

"If you're worried about us, don't be!" Lucy declared. "Back in college, we were pretty wild, and being naked in a sauna is tame compared to some of the stuff we did!"

"Then let me go turn on the heating unit," I said.

I went downstairs, set the sauna controls, and filled the oak bucket with water. Once I'd done that, I went back upstairs.

"About ten minutes, and it'll be hot enough to create steam," I said.

"Tiger, I did switch my hours starting in June," Jessica said. "Tuesday through Saturday, 6:00am to 4:00pm, as we discussed. And starting in June, I get three weeks of vacation time."

"As I said, you have to decide your hours, but I'm happy you'll be home earlier and have Sundays free. And the extra week of vacation will be nice. Did you get the week in August for our trip to Iron Mountain?"

"Yes. I also took the week between Christmas and New Year's when you have off. That leaves a week, but I may use those a day at a time."

"Whatever you need, Jess."

"He is very compliant!" Lucy observed.

"Tiger's philosophy is that everyone should do what makes them happy, and it makes him happy when I'm happy!"

"And that applies to everything?" Allyson asked with a smirk.

"Tiger knows the girl always *cums* first!" Jess declared.

"As it should be!" Lucy declared.

"And second, and third, and fourth..." I added with a smug grin.

"I should make you prove that!" Allyson declared.

"Ask Jess," I chuckled.

"For a reference? Or for permission?"

"Yes," I chuckled. "Anyway, the sauna should be warm enough by the time we undress and go in."

The four of us went downstairs, and Jessica and I began undressing near the closet with the towels, and her friends followed suit. Everyone grabbed a towel and went into the sauna. The girls spread their towels and sat down while I went over to the heating unit and ladled water on the rocks. Steam rose immediately and began filling the room, so I went to sit next to Jessica.

Both doctors were in great shape. The blonde Allyson had what I would call a typical Midwestern build, soft but not fat, while the red-haired Lucy was more athletic and, to my delight, sported neatly trimmed reddish-orange pubic hair.

"Do you always go into the sauna naked with strange women?" Allyson asked with a smirk.

"Well, I'm in here with Jess all the time, so..." I teased.

"Watch it, Tiger!" Jessica growled, feigning a threat.

"If the shoe fits..." I chuckled.

"Is he always like this?" Lucy asked.

"This is Tiger being tame!" Jessica said. "You should hear him with the kids! And they give as good as they get."

"So does he, to hear you tell it!" Allyson smirked.

"You're welcome to ask for a demonstration," Jessica declared.

"Here?" Allyson asked. "Really?"

Lucy laughed, "Asks the girl who had sex in front of six of her friends and watched two girls lose their virginities with an audience!"

I laughed, "The late 70s and early 80s were a lot of fun! High school and college aren't nearly the same these days."

"AIDS really put a damper on the sexual revolution," Lucy observed.

"And that's why I put the rules in place that allow Tiger to prowl the savannah!" Jessica declared.

"It's the female cats who prowl," I chuckled. "The males lay around and service the females!"

"How DO you put up with him?" Lucy asked.

Jessica laughed, "He curls my toes! And all kidding aside, he takes very good care of me. I wouldn't be here without him."

"I had help," I said.

"What do you think, Lucy?" Allyson asked.

"I think Paul would be *very* unhappy," Lucy said. "You, on the other hand, have no such restrictions."

"No disrespect, Allyson; bummer for you, Tiger! Red hair, green eyes, athletic build, and small boobs with red pubic hair are your sweet spot!"

"Hah!" Allyson smirked. "This blonde has an advantage I bet neither of you has!"

"Oh?" Jessica asked.

"As if I'm going to tell! Steve could find out if he's interested."

"I haven't heard you ask Jessica, not to mention the core requirement and the necessary rules waiver."

"In my forty years, I have never once asked a woman for permission to sleep with her husband!" Allyson declared. "Talk about weird!"

"So, I'll be your first?" Jessica teased, causing the rest of us to laugh.

"Most of us girls never experimented that way, though the two girls I mentioned before who lost their virginites with an audience ended up in a relationship for a time. One of them married a doctor and moved to Ohio. The other had a kid with a guy but has been in a long-term relationship with a girl for close to two decades."

"There were actually three who lost their virginity in front of the group," Lucy interjected. "We just didn't know about the third until afterwards."

"You're right, of course," Allyson said. "I was thinking of the two who announced it!"

"Bold!" I declared. "But, been there, done that!"

"OF COURSE YOU HAVE!" Lucy exclaimed.

"Sorry you're going to miss out?" Allyson teased.

"Miss out on what?" Lucy teased. "I haven't heard you ask!"

Allyson rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Jess, could I get permission to fuck your husband?"



Birgit

"It's weird," I said to Libby as we walked home from Rachel's, where we'd had pizza.

"What?" Libby asked.

"All the drama around sex has been with guys! Never with girls."

"Come to the dark side; we have cookies!" Libby smirked.

I laughed, "You play for *both* teams!"

"Yes, and my relationship with Lilibeth is stable, and she's not jealous. But I thought things were good with Tomás."

"I know, but...shoot. I actually don't know."

"Maybe you should take a step back, figure out what you *actually* want, then try to achieve it instead of being led around by your clit!"

"Hey!" I protested.

"Deny it!" Libby said. "I *dare* you! I *double-dog* dare you!"

She had a point, unfortunately.

"I can't," I sighed.

"Have you considered that having a steady boyfriend might be the cure for what ails you?"

"But I hate the idea of being tied down!"

"Unless it's being tied down by an older, experienced guy who would ravish you for hours?"

I laughed, "Yeah, besides that!"

"Seriously, why not just be Tomás' girlfriend? He's very happy with the threesomes, and I bet you anything he wouldn't object to you being with Lilibeth if you wanted."

"I know she wants to," I said. "She promised to make me scream!"

Libby laughed, "She has the best tongue on the planet! I know this might be TMI, but Jesse is awesome, and she's better!"

"And my dad?" I asked with a smirk.

Libby laughed, "I think Rachel has told you more than you should probably know about that! Do you really want the answer?"

I thought about it for a few seconds, then shook my head, "No."

"I bet if you ask Tomás, he'll agree, and I'm positive you've told him about going to Sweden."

"I have. And I think you're right, but he can never spend the night. I really like that."

"I think the only chance you had for that was Peter."

"Life sucks," I groused.

"No, it doesn't. May I make an observation that might bug you?"

"Sure."

"Your dad spoiled you, and you think the world revolves around you. It doesn't. You can't bend everything to your will and have to deal with reality."

"You aren't the first person to say that to me," I admitted. "But there's a problem with your idea -- I asked Bob to go with me to Saint Martin in March."

"Then you have to decide, Birgit."

"If I tell him 'no' at this point, I'll wreck even our friendship. I did that once to him already."

"And he won't be your steady boyfriend?"

"I think he might have before; now I'm not sure because of how badly I messed up."

"Take some time, figure out what you want, then make a plan, Birgit. That's all you can do."

 Steve

"So, about this advantage?" I asked Allyson as we walked into the Playroom.

"You'll need lube," she smirked.

"Been there, done that, got the T-shirt!"

"Not THAT, you nut! What is it with guys and anal?"

I chuckled, "Except on rare occasions, it's the girls who ask for that! And I know a couple girls who really get off on it! I can take or leave it. So why the lube?"

"At forty, I bet you I'm tighter than your typical fifteen-year-old virgin!"

"There's never a fifteen-year-old virgin around when you need one!" I teased.

Allyson laughed, "You'll have to go to Europe for that, at least to stay out of trouble!"

"I know. Again, been there, done that! I'm going to guess it's not vaginismus."

"That's psychological, and I have ZERO aversion to penetrative sex! According to my gynecologist, my bulbospongiosus muscles are larger, closer together, and stronger than typical. I also have a very strong pubococcygeus muscle. All of that led to a LONG labor and delivery, but also extremely pleasurable sex both for me and my partners! The bulbospongiosus muscle aids in clitoral erection."

"The lube is in the drawer of the nightstand just behind you."

Allyson opened the draw, extracted the tube, and set it on the nightstand.

"STI test? Check. Birth control? Vasectomy and tubal ligation. Permission? Granted!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" I asked.

"Well, in *that* condition, your phallus is of no use to either of us!"

"I'm sure an ER doctor has a prescription for that!"

Allyson rolled her eyes theatrically, "The only thing guys think about!"

"Not even CLOSE to true! And there are any number of ways to achieve the desired reaction without your mouth touching there! In fact, I'll prove it to you!"

I pulled her to me, and we exchanged a soft French kiss. I maneuvered her onto the bed, then climbed in. I positioned myself so my face was over her chest, lowered my mouth to one of her breasts, planted a kiss on each nipple, then took the left one into my mouth and sucked gently while teasing it with my tongue. After a minute, I switched to her other breast. A minute later, I kissed my way down her body, nuzzled my nose in her blonde pubic hair, and planted a kiss on her clitoral hood.

I kissed the inside of her thighs, then ran my tongue along her plump labia, get my first taste of her musky juices. When I pressed my tongue into her a minute later, it confirmed her earlier statements, and the erection caused by tasting her became almost painfully hard, anticipating the feel of what was sure to be an extremely tight fit. Patience being a virtue, I delayed my own physical gratification to bring her off twice with my mouth.

After her second orgasm, I sat up, grabbed the lube, slathered it on my glans and shaft, then rubbed some along Allyson's engorged labia. I closed the tub, set it on the nightstand, and moved between Allyson's legs. I grasped my shaft, rubbed my glans along her labia, kissed her, then slowly pushed forward.

The fit was *tight*, and it took a dozen short strokes to fully embed myself in her.

"Damn," I breathed as her extremely tight tunnel grasped my throbbing shaft.

"Like that?" She smirked.

"Yeah," I breathed, savoring the sensations.

"Good! Now, fuck my brains out!"

XVI. Can I Have A Hug?

January 12, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

I haven't been fucked like that since college," Allyson said groggily when we woke early on Sunday morning.

"I need a shower before I walk Jess to the hospital," I said. "I assume you're on shift today?"

"No," Allyson replied. "I have the day off because I'm seeing my son, but I don't pick him up until 9:30am."

"You're welcome to stay for breakfast."

"Can you come back to bed after you walk Jess to work?" she asked invitingly. "I'm betting this is a one-off, so if I could get one more..."

"I'll clear it with the Empress of the Universe!" I chuckled.

"Kara?"

I laughed, "No, her daughter, Birgit! She and I usually cuddle in the morning before breakfast. Let me get my shower; you can stay in bed."

Allyson stayed in bed while I went into the bathroom. I showered quickly, then put on clean clothes I had in the Playroom before going out to the kitchen to find Jessica eating breakfast and drinking tea.

"Is she conscious?" Jessica asked with a smirk.

"Barely!"

I poured myself some tea and sat down with Jessica while she finished eating. When she finished, the two of us put on our winter gear for the walk to the hospital, as it was only about 10°F outside.

"Thank you for the waiver," I said.

"You're just disappointed that Lucy wasn't available! I saw that look when you saw her naked!"

"So I'm a sucker for redheads!" I chuckled. "Especially with pubic hair!"

"Don't like the modern trend of a shaved mons?"

"I prefer neatly trimmed, as you well know, but it doesn't bother me except for redheads!"

Jessica laughed, "And, your best friend is Public Enemy Number One!"

"A crime against humanity if there ever was one!" I chuckled. "I should report him to the International Criminal Court!"

"You don't believe they have any jurisdiction!" Jessica challenged.

"But they believe they do!" I countered. "But forget the silliness! A question I should have asked before - what were the terms of the waiver?"

"None, really, other than our usual rules and that she could have an overnight. I told her dalliances were typically one or two encounters but that it was up to you, minus needing permission for an overnight. For last night, I was OK with it because I knew Kara and Suzanne wouldn't be home until after midnight, and neither Yuriko nor Natalie had asked. I took a warm bubble bath, then went to sleep. Did Allyson say something?"

"Just that she assumed it was a one-off occurrence, and I think that's probably wise."

"Probably. I still say you should create a sign-up sheet for your Thursday sessions that begin this week! Your schedule would be booked solid like Katy's is for the bed-and-breakfast! It's just too bad most medical students are paupers!"

I chuckled, "There is this little thing called the law, too. And if I was going to do *that*, then I'd have taken Anthony up on his offer to conduct interviews!"

"Setting aside your reasonable objection, you have to admit it could be fun!"

"It's not as if I'm lacking attention! There appear to be plenty of available girls who are eighteen and older, not to mention Emma is moving to Chicago, and Keiki plans to stay with us for the summer."

"What about the art student?"

"She'll be at the house today, and we'll see how she does at Philosophy Club. Did you see that Jesse is having his Hangout on alternate Sundays at the house?"

"Because Libby is graduating, right?"

"Yes."

We reached the hospital, and after a hug and kiss, Jessica went into the ER, and I turned to walk home. When I arrived, Birgit was waiting for me, and I decided my best course of action was to give her ten minutes of cuddling before I returned to Allyson. Birgit laughed when I told her and accepted the ten minutes, then I returned to the Playroom and got into bed with Allyson.

We had a long, slow screw, which was something we hadn't done the night before, with Allyson demanding I fuck her brains out at the start of each coupling. This time, though, I declined and enjoyed the embrace of her incredibly tight pussy on my shaft as I slowly moved in her. She had five orgasms before I had my release.

"That was different," she said as we lay next to each other on our backs.

"That's my preference," I said. "Not that I have ANY objections or complaints!"

Allyson laughed softly, "Obviously, given how much you enjoyed it!"

"OK to ask a question about what you said before about not having had sex like that since college?"

"You know how medical school and Residency are, right?"

"Only vicariously," I replied.

"Who had the time or energy? I was a typically wild college student and had threesomes, and the group encounters I mentioned. That more or less ended when I started medical school, and I cracked down and focused on studying. I married as a Resident, and my husband was conventional, and given how tired I was all the time, our physical relationship was mediocre, at best.

"I got pregnant right after I became an Attending at Loyola, and about a year after my son was born, things kind of came to a head with my husband. We split amicably, and since then, I've had two boyfriends and a few lovers, but we never really clicked. I clicked better with you than any of them! Jess was kind enough to share! Jess found a creative solution to the problem, and despite being unconventional, it seems to have worked well."

"There were some rough patches," I said.

"I think that's true for every physician, but especially women. My rough patches led to divorce, and Lucy's convinced her not to have kids or marry. Al Barton had his during medical school and Residency, which I'm positive you know."

"I do. Are you dating now?"

"There's a guy I see from time to time for dinner and companionship, but it's obviously not serious, and I know he has other girls he sees. As contrary as it seems, I'm actually happy working, spending time with friends, and only getting laid occasionally. I know other female doctors like that, too. Jess could rent you out and make a fortune!"

I laughed, "Probably not the best idea, for a host of reasons."

"For most guys, I'd say it was their fantasy, but given you have five women you live with and permission to play around, it's not yours. I have no right to ask this, but what is YOUR fantasy?"

I chuckled, "Asks the pretty doctor who demanded I fuck her brains out five times last night!"

Allyson laughed, "OK, sure, but everyone has fantasies."

"I've lived mine!"

"I suppose so, if things I infer from what Jess has said are true! We're obviously going to have to get up soon, and there is one thing we didn't do last night."

"Only one?" I chuckled. "You're not THAT naïve!"

Allyson laughed, "Did I use the word 'only'?"

"No."

"The pretty blonde doctor would like to fellate the handsome man and have him ejaculate in her mouth."

"The handsome man won't object and requests the pretty doctor conclude with a French kiss with his semen still in her mouth!"

"I only ever had one guy who was OK with that, and it was back in college! And he didn't request it!"

"Does the idea turn you on?"

"Yes!"

"That's why!"

Allyson kissed me, then moved down and gave me a slow, sensual blowjob, easily deep-throating me but ensuring she backed off when I twitched so that my cum ended up in her mouth rather than down her throat. After the last spurt, she moved on top of me and ground against me, lowering her mouth to mine. Her lips parted, and our tongues tangled in the cum she hadn't swallowed.

We kissed until Allyson had brought herself off, then got out of bed and went to the bathroom to shower. We washed each other, dried off, dressed, and then went to the kitchen to have breakfast with Kara, Suzanne, and Birgit.

 Birgit

After breakfast, I went up to my room and decided I needed to talk to Katy. Normally, I would have IM'd her, but I chose to call her because it was easier. Fortunately, she had time to talk.

"What's up?"

"Something just doesn't feel right," I said.

"Physically? Emotionally? Mentally?"

"Dad would say I'm mental!"

"Takes one to know one!" Katy declared, and we both laughed.

"Emotional, I think," I said.

"Struggling with sex and relationships, like a normal teen, now that you're past the 'new toy' stage?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Have you thought about what you want now that you have it out of your system?"

"As if!" I giggled.

"Birgit," Katy said sternly, "if you want advice, you need to be serious."

"Sorry. That's just it, I don't know."

"Has something happened?"

"You know about what happened with Peter, Philip, and Bob."

"It sounds to me as if you regret your behavior. Not the sex, but how you handled the relationships."

"I guess."

"Do you have someone you're seeing now?"

"Tomás."

"Do you like him? I mean more than just as a sex partner?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you should consider having him as a boyfriend and see how that works out. It's a High School relationship, and nobody really expects those to be permanent."

"I mean, I could," I replied, "but I invited my friend Bob to go to Saint Martin in March, and I already messed up with him once by making plans then changing them because of another guy."

"If you had to choose between them, which would you pick?"

"Bob, I think, but he has a friend named Meghan who he does stuff with."

"I infer that means they're doing more than just hanging out."

"I think so; I mean, I'm sure, but I don't know it for a fact."

"I think you're going to have to choose, Birgit."

"Dad didn't have to!" I protested.

"And your dad suffered emotional trauma for years, and a whole gang of people were caught up in the drama while he searched for a solution. And even when he found the solution, things weren't all sweetness and light for almost a decade. It was only after he returned from Japan that the drama basically subsided. I wouldn't advise his path for anyone, and you've said you eventually want to marry and have kids."

"I hadn't thought about that," I admitted. "I was just thinking about his wives and girlfriends."

"I'm sure you know about some of the ones where things not only didn't work out but caused all manner of emotional trauma."

"Aunt Bethany, Becky van Hoek, and Michelle York," I said.

"You are remarkably well informed!"

"Maybe," I said. "I think there's something very important about Dad that I don't know."

"And unless he's willing to share, as much as it annoys you, it will have to remain unknown. If you had your dream situation, what would it be? And I don't mean with your dad!"

"I don't know," I said. "That's just it."

"Nobody can tell you, Birgit. You have to figure it out. Let me ask you this -- if you had it to do over again, would you handle things with Philip differently?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I kind of freaked out when he said he loved me."

"Typically, it's the guy who freaks out when the girl says that first, at least in High School. Have you tried to get in touch with him again?"

"I sent him a card around Thanksgiving, but he didn't answer. I hurt him pretty badly."

"That is a fairly common occurrence in High School when you're trying to figure out relationships. You make mistakes and learn from them, so by the time you graduate college, you're ready for a legitimate adult relationship that you intend to last a lifetime. May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Don't go to bed with any new guys until you figure out what you want. If you just want to fuck, then be prepared for the consequences. If you want a relationship, you have to nurture it and work hard at it. It's not easy, and it's not meant to be easy."

"Matthew and Chelsea?"

"The exception that proves the rule," Katy said. "But you can't count on that happening. Seriously, think about what you want, then figure out how to achieve your goal. I'll let you go, but call or IM any time, and I'll see you in June."

"Thanks, Katy," I said.

I hung up and considered what to do. I had an idea, so I used speed dial to place another call.

"Doyle Residence; Lilibeth speaking."

"Hey, it's Birgit. I owe you an apology."

"For?"

"We agreed to be BFFs, and I haven't really talked to you in almost a month. Want to come over?"

"Sure! What time?"

"Come over for lunch at noon."

"Great! See you then!"

I closed my phone, then sat down to do my math homework.



Jesse

I left church as soon as the Divine Liturgy ended and headed to Hyde Park. I had Aunt Jessica's car with her MD plates and 'park anywhere' sticker, so I drove

straight to the hospital and parked in the reserved lot, then walked to the diner to meet Angelina.

"Hi," she said when I walked in.

"Hi!"

The hostess directed us to a booth and left menus. The waitress came to get our drink orders, but Angelina and I both knew what we wanted so we placed our food order as well.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked once the waitress brought our Cokes.

"I miss you," she said.

"You know you're welcome to hang out with us and come to our Hangouts," I said.

"I know, but I *miss* you."

Beating around the bush would not do either of us any favors, and that meant I had to take a direct approach, though I could be nice about it.

"I like you," I said. "But nothing has changed except that it's less than eighteen months before I leave for college. I'm going to UW-Madison, and I'll only come home on breaks. During the summer, I'll probably coach hockey camps in Madison or up in Minnesota. That makes a committed relationship difficult at best."

"And would mean you couldn't sleep with every girl who asked!" Angelina countered.

I refused to take the bait.

"If you recall the conversation we had last September, I made the point that it wasn't about that. I mean, yes, I have the freedom, but the other freedom is more important. I don't want to answer to anyone for my time. I don't want to be forced to choose between my friends and family, or things I want to do, and a girlfriend."

"And have sex with whoever you want!"

"If you remember, I said if I was forced to choose between my friends and sex, I'd choose my friends every single time."

"And when you get married?"

"The equation is different, but I'd still want to spend time with my friends, hang out with my dad and my brothers, and do stuff I wanted to do. Yes, it would be a compromise and one I'll make to marry and have kids. But I'm not even seventeen until next month, and I don't think it's smart to tie myself down. I'm happy for you to hang out with us and to be friends, but that's the limit."

"If you think I'm going to have sex with you, you're insane!"

"I'm going to point out that you're the one who keeps bringing it up. If you don't want to have sex with someone, then don't. If you do, then do. But you shouldn't use it as a weapon or a bribe or anything like that."

"You can be a real jerk!" Angelina growled.

I thought about pointing out that she had shown up for our group outing and had asked me to have lunch, not the other way around, but I saw no point.

"I'm sorry you think so," I said. "I've been nothing but honest with you from day one."

"Except when you deny it's about having sex with as many girls as you can!"

"You're free to believe whatever you want, but believing something doesn't make it true."

She gave me a dirty look, and I half expected her to get up and leave, but she stayed sitting. The waitress brought our food, and Angelina ate without saying a word. I saw no point in trying to start a conversation, as I was positive it would return to the same point -- she wanted me to be her boyfriend, and I wasn't interested.

It wasn't her; it was *anyone*, and that was true even if I didn't get laid again until college. Of course, the chances of that happening were small, but it was a true statement. It was also the case that I was going to visit Akiko in Japan in six months, and if I had to choose between the two of them, Akiko would win hands down. The same was true for Larisa, even though she and I hadn't done more than share a few kisses.

When we finished eating, I paid the bill, left a tip, and Angelina and I walked outside. She said nothing and simply began walking in the opposite direction of our houses. I shrugged and walked across the street to where I'd parked the car so I could drive home.

 Birgit

Lilibeth and I ate lunch, then went up to my room to listen to music and talk.

"I'm sorry we haven't talked," I said.

"You said that before," Lilibeth replied. "It's OK. With the holidays and stuff, we were all busy. And if you're worried about Libby, we're not a couple. And I know she wants to be with a guy and a girl and have all three do stuff together. You know that could never work for me."

I smiled, "You've made that clear! Are you going to get back together with your girlfriend in Boston?"

"Maybe. We talk, but she's seeing someone and is serious and exclusive. How are things with you?"

"Other than with boys, pretty good."

"Well, if boys are a problem..." Lilibeth teased.

"You can make me scream?"

"Yes! But I know you prefer boys. What's going on?"

"I'm trying to figure out what I want. I've messed things up with some guys, and now I'm not sure what to do. My friend Katy suggested just being with one guy, but that creates a problem."

"Why?"

"Because I invited Bob to go to Saint Martin, but he can't be my boyfriend because of Meghan, and if I ask Tomás to be my boyfriend, I can't take Bob to Saint Martin, and it would be the second time I basically blew him off for another guy."

"Girls, Birgit! Girls! We're soft, cuddly, and drama-free!"

I laughed, "Have you met my sister Stephie?"

"And what was it that caused her drama? A boy!"

"You might have a point," I giggled.

"In all seriousness, is there any reason you can't just spend time with Tomás and not be with anyone else before your trip? That seems like a workable solution unless Bob thinks he'll be your boyfriend because you're going to Saint Martin together."

"No, he's OK with just being a fuck buddy, and we didn't make any plans except the trip."

"And Tomás?"

"Him, too."

"Then what's the problem? I mean, unless you have some burning need to have another dick, it sounds like everything is good. And you're getting your dose of pussy, too. Be happy with your situation because it's pretty good. The only way it could be better is if we had a regular sleepover!"

"You're really that interested in me?"

"Duh! You are super sexy, you're fun, you taste good, and you know how to make me orgasm! I know you like guys, but I promise no drama, and I won't be jealous of Tomás, Bob, or Libby. And you absolutely enjoyed it, even if you prefer boys."

"Your parents will allow sleepovers?"

"Sure! You have two beds, but they don't have to know which one I'm in!"

I giggled, "That sounds like something I'd say!"

"I have one more thing to offer," Lilibeth said. "I'll use your personal massager on you, and you can use it on me, so long as you promise to NEVER try to put it in me."

"Is it OK if I think about it?"

"Obviously! Tell me about the trip to Saint Martin."

 Steve

"And we meet again!" Jackson declared as he, Natalie, Suzanne, and I sat in the sauna after lunch. "Is the plan still the same?"

"Yes," I replied. "Though with all the new people, we need to talk about creating a third chapter."

"How many new people?"

"At least six," I replied. "I hate losing some long-term attendees, but having a third chapter is a huge step."

"Who would you want to lead it?" Natalie asked.

"Logically, I think it has to be Elizabeth and Ben," I said. "There are close to a dozen people who are in the Western suburbs, and that's a good core group. I'm

not thrilled, but we can't have fifty people in the group, and we'll be close to that. More than thirty is unwieldy, but we'll lose several to graduation over the next two years."

"Who are the new people?" Jackson asked.

"John, Tabitha, and Libby, who used to attend the Hangout, Danielle, and Shaye, all of whom will be here today. You met Emma at the impromptu session, and she'll be here in June."

"Who's Shaye?" Natalie asked.

"A student at the School of the Art Institute I met a few weeks ago. Over the summer, we'll likely have my friend Keiki here as well, though only for the summer because she's going to Stanford. And starting in June, Jessica will join us because her schedule is changing, and she'll have Sunday and Monday off."

"Cool," Jackson observed. "Did construction start on your new building?"

"They're tearing down the old Annex," I replied. "Everything is going according to schedule. How are things at M & M?"

"Great! I'm working with Jennifer on a custom test rig for a company in California, but I can't name them."

"I totally understand," I replied. "I take it everything is good with Holly."

"More than! Her pay is obscene, but you knew that, I'm sure."

"And to think that could have all been mine!" I chuckled. "All for the low, low price of divorcing Jessica, dumping Kara, and marrying Samantha!"

"What?!" Jackson asked.

"He offered me a million bucks a year to become his protégé and take over the family business, and Samantha was part of the offer! Of course, she was more than willing and has maintained ever since we'd have been the ultimate power couple. I said we are that now, just minus the sex, and she pointed out that was true about her parents, too!"

Suzanne, Jackson, and Natalie all laughed.

"And I bet you weren't tempted," Jackson said.

"Not a bit," I replied. "Not even for a second."



Jesse

I had just arrived home when my mobile phone rang.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi, Jesse! It's Anna Lundqvist!"

"Hi, Anna! How are you?"

"Great! What are you doing at the end of February?"

"School, ice hockey practice, and hopefully playoff games. Why?"

"We have «sportlov», or sports vacation, the week of February 23rd, and I wondered if you'd like me to visit!"

"The State Ice Hockey Championship final is on the 23rd, so hockey will be done. That means no practice and no games, but I'd still have school, which gets out at 2:45pm. If you can deal with that, then sure!"

"Cool! Ask your moms and let me know, OK? My mom will want to confirm with them."

"One sec," I said. "They're here."

I muted my phone, then went to the living room.

"One of the girls I met in Sweden wants to come visit during their break, which is the week of February 23rd. It won't cause any conflicts with hockey because the State Championship final is the 22nd."

"She's welcome to visit," Mom One said.

"She said her mom will want to confirm with you."

"Now?"

"One sec."

I un-muted the phone.

"Mom One says it's OK. Did your mom want to talk to her now?"

"Yes, if that's OK."

"It is. Let me give her the phone."

I handed the phone to Mom One and waited while she spoke briefly to Anna, then spoke to Mrs. Lundqvist. It was obvious everything was cool, and Mom One handed me the phone.

"Hi!" Anna exclaimed. "I'll make flight reservations and call you with the details! I'll try to arrive on Friday evening and leave on Saturday afternoon."

"Great! If we make the championships, you could see our game. Let me know!"

"It's OK to sleep in your bed with you, right?"

"Yes. My moms are like Swedish parents."

"Great! See you!"

"See you!"

I closed the phone and slipped it into my pocket.

"Let me guess," Mom Two smirked. "A smoking hot blonde?"

"Of course! My height, blonde, with toned muscles. Think Viking warrior princess!"

"What sport does she play?"

"Football, of course!"

"I assume she'll stay in your room?"

"Yes. She actually asked, and that's when I said the thing about you being like Swedish parents."

"We didn't see you yesterday after your lunch. What happened?"

"I'd say Zahra is going to have some restrictions on seeing me. I just hope it doesn't mess things up with Birgit. On the plus side, Adi's dad let her start coming on Friday nights again, but that was contingent on Zahra and Zaida being there, plus Ali and Jamal. I'm afraid both Zahra and Zaida will be restricted, and that would probably mean Adi wouldn't be able to hang out with us."

"There's not much you can do about that," Mom Two said. "Muslims tend to be extremely conservative, and you know they can't marry someone who is not Muslim."

"Actually, it's a double standard," I said. "A Muslim man can marry a Christian or Jew, and they can keep going to their church or synagogue, but a Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim man."

"And right there is a reason to reject it all as nonsense!" Mom One said. "Not to mention their views on LGB people."

"Oh, I know," I replied. "And I wasn't thinking about marrying her, but I enjoyed hanging out with her, and she liked hanging out with me. But don't worry, my tall Swedish girl doesn't go to church, nor does Larisa, and Akiko is basically secular but observed traditional Japanese religion, which is a mix of Shinto and Buddhism."

"Narrowing down the field?" Mom Two asked.

"Those are the three girls I like the best out of all of the ones I've hung out with."

"CeCe?"

"I did like her a lot, but she was ready to get serious, and I'm not. As I said to Angelina, I'm not even seventeen, and I don't want to get tied down and have to answer to a girlfriend about how much time I spend with my guy friends, or hockey, or whatever. You know what happened with Nicholas and Stephe -- she had a fit because he wanted to play video games with us. I'm not signing up for that crap!"

"I wasn't trying to push, Jesse," Mom Two said. "I was just asking about CeCe because you two were pretty close and spent a lot of time together."

"We did, but in the end, the distance was a problem. It's the same thing I said to Angelina -- in eighteen months, I'll be at UW-Madison and won't come home except on breaks. It'll work for Mikey and Nicole the same way it did for Jerry and Mia -- they're the same age and can go to college together."

"Just do what you think is right and what makes you happy," Mom One said. "In the scheme of things, it's not too long before you set out into the world and start a career and then a family. Six years is not a long time, even if it seems like it right now."

My phone rang, and I answered, and when I hung up, I let my moms know I was going to Uncle Dave's house to hang out with Peter, Nicky, Albert, and some other guys.

 Steve

We ended up not discussing *Aesop's Fables* at Philosophy Club as introductions, and then the discussion about forming a new chapter consumed most of the time. Just before it was time to end, the doorbell rang, and Yuriko answered it, then came to the great room.

"Steve-sama, there are two police detectives at the door."

"OK. I'll be right there. Trish, Liz, and Julius, would you join us in the kitchen, please?"

"What's up?" Trish asked.

"I suspect it's about Danielle's friend who disappeared about a week ago. Liz knows the details."

I went to the door and saw Detectives León and Madison, who had investigated Jackie Williams' murder.

"Detectives, how can I help you?"

"Hi, Mr. Adams. Are you armed?"

"No. My firearms are locked away."

"Could we come in? It's a bit cold out."

"We can go to the kitchen," I said. "Same conditions as before."

"Agreed."

I led them to the kitchen, where my trio of lawyers was waiting.

"Detectives León and Madison, Liz Crane, my corporate and personal attorney, Julius Crane, criminal defense attorney, and Trish Fitzpatrick, civil rights attorney.

"Mind if I asked who tipped you off we were coming?" Detective León asked.

"Nobody," I replied. "I have a group of friends over, and that included these three attorneys. If you've looked into me at all, you know my firm provides software for law firms, so you pretty much can't find a time when I don't have a least one attorney present."

"What's this about, Detective?" Liz asked.

"Nadia Granger," Detective Madison said. "Her body was found last night."

Liz put her hand on my arm, so I remained quiet.

"Mr. Adams spoke with Deputy Randolph of the DeKalb Sheriff's Department and provided everything he knew."

"We have a copy of that report."

"Then you know she left here by taxi, which was confirmed by American Taxi, and was dropped off in Lincoln Park about twenty-five minutes later. My client hasn't seen nor heard from her since she left here and can prove his whereabouts both with electronic records and personal testimony."

"Will you allow us to ask him questions?" Detective León inquired.

"May I have five minutes, please? We'll step into the hallway there, which leads to the servants' quarters."

"OK," he agreed.

My three lawyers and I stepped into the hallway that led to the Playroom and shut the door most of the way, though I stood so the detectives could see my back. She quickly brought Julius and Trish up to speed.

"Did you have *any* interaction with her of any kind after she left?" Liz asked once she'd finished explaining.

"None."

"I have to ask -- was there any physical contact between you and Nadia?"

"No," I replied. "She was in the Indian room with my wives, then she and I sat in the wingback chairs in my study. When she left, I walked her out and paid the cabbie more than the fare plus tip to Union Station."

"DNA?" Julius asked.

"That's what I suspect," Liz said. "Steve, they'll likely ask for a DNA swab to rule you out. I need to know right now if they'll turn up *anything*."

"Not a thing," I said. "Not even a kiss or hug. I don't even think I touched her hand. But to answer your question directly, there is no chance they will find my saliva or semen on the young woman. None. That was the only time I saw her, and literally nothing happened."

"Are you willing to give them DNA if they ask?" Liz inquired.

"I'll follow your husband's advice on that one, given his history in the Public Defender's office. My DNA is actually in some file somewhere because it was part of a failed paternity suit."

"They'll never find that," Julius said. "Normally, I'd say 'no' and make them get a court order. Liz, do they have probable cause?"

"They can probably make it from instant messages and her visit here."

"Then you're better off just cooperating," Julius said. "That is, if you are positive."

"Absolutely positive. And as Liz said, I can account for every minute. Heck, I have video from the security system here at the house. They'll show exactly when she arrived, when she left, and they should show the cab. The camera at the back of the house will show the cars were there and also that I didn't leave."

"Do they know about the security system?" Trish asked.

I chuckled, "No, and neither did the FBI, if you recall!"

Trish laughed, "*Birgit versus the FBI* would be a smash hit if you could release it somehow!"

"I could put it on ShareYourWorld.com," I said. "But I think the FBI would object vehemently!"

"They would!" Trish agreed. "I'd offer the detectives the video from your security system. Again, we could make them fight for it, but I don't see the point."

"There is one thing to consider," I said. "My usual reaction is to refuse to cooperate. If I suddenly cooperate, that might lead them to think I'm guilty."

"Yes, and we could go down the whole Vizzini route and tie ourselves in knots," Liz said. "Julius, I think he can talk to them because his alibi is rock solid."

"Then let's do that," Julius said. "Steve, if I touch your arm, stop talking, and I mean mid-syllable."

"Got it."

I opened the door, and we rejoined the cops.

"Mr. Adams will answer any relevant questions you ask," Julius said.

"Thank you," Detective León said. "Mr. Adams, can you corroborate the information provided to Deputy Randolph?"

"Absolutely. I can provide you video from our home security system. It will show her arriving, her leaving, her getting into the cab, and me returning to the house. In addition, the camera in the back will show that all cars registered to this address were in the driveway and will show I didn't leave the house.""

"We'd like those, please. Do they have time and date stamps?"

"Yes. I'll need to transfer them from the hard disks to videotapes for you. I'll preserve the originals as well."

"We can't have those?"

"No. It would disable the system. It records on hard disks like you'd have in your home computer."

"When can you get those to us?" Detective Madison asked.

"What time period do you need?"

"I'd say from fifteen minutes before she arrived until 6:00am the next morning."

"OK, I replied. "That will show me walking my wife to work at the hospital. I'll give you until 6:30am so you can see me return."

"Did you have intimate relations with Miss Granger?" Detective León asked.

"No. Not even so much as a hug."

"Would you be willing to provide a DNA sample?"

"Yes."

"And can you provide the names of anyone who can verify your whereabouts from 5:00pm on the 3rd until 5:00pm on the 4th?"

"Yes. That will be a long list because it will include everyone at the karate dōjō where I teach, as well as about two dozen men, a third of whom are active duty Naval officers with whom I had breakfast. And if I add in the restaurateur, his wife, our usual waitress, and my kids, you're going to have a list of over a hundred people."

Detective Maddison laughed. "OK. How about two names from each location?"

"I can do that."

"May I make a call?" Detective León inquired.

"Certainly. Use the phone behind you on the wall."

He made a call, and I deduced he was arranging for an evidence technician to come to the house to supervise transferring the video to videotape.

"Mr. Adams," he said after he finished the call. "A technician will be here tomorrow at 8:00am to supervise transferring the video."

"It'll take hours," I replied. "The system isn't designed for high-speed transfer, so it will take an hour for every hour of video you want, which is about ten. If you want to speed it up, we'd need to use a video production system, but that will likely cost a few thousand dollars to rent for the time we'll need, plus the cost of the engineer to hook it up."

"The CPD or DeKalb Sheriff would need to cover those costs," Liz interjected. "And if you're thinking of removing the equipment, we'll want a warrant, and you'll bear the costs of doing the transfers."

"I guess we're in for a long day tomorrow, then," Detective Madison said. "The same tech who supervises the transfer will swab your DNA."

"OK," I agreed. "I'll be here."

"Thank you for your coöperation, Mr. Adams," Detective Madison said.

"Trish, would you show the detectives out," Julius requested.

Trish did as he asked, then returned.

"One of us should be here on Monday," Julius said. "It should probably be me."

"I'll sign a personal retainer," I said. "This clearly isn't NIKA business. Let's go back to our friends."

We went back to the great room, and I asked Danielle to join me in my study.

"The detectives were here because they found Nadia's body last night."

"Oh, no!" she gasped. "What happened?"

"The police didn't say."

"They suspect you?!"

I nodded, "Yes, but I have a solid alibi, corroborated by video and electronic records, plus a bunch of people who saw me."

"How can we find out what happened?"

"When they charge someone," I said. "Danielle, they asked for my DNA."

"You think she might have been raped?"

"I don't know, but they asked if I'd had sex with her. I didn't, of course."

"Oh, God," Danielle said. "Can I have a hug?"

I nodded, held out my arms, and she stepped into them, buried her face in my shoulder, and began sobbing."

XVII. Religious Differences

January 13, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

'The body of Nadia Granger, twenty, of DeKalb, was found in a vacant apartment in Lincoln Park. Police say she died on the 3rd or the 4th, but are not releasing any further details, except to say that foul play was involved in her death. The apartment, in a four-flat owned by Yuusuke Holdings, has been vacant since December 30, and the new tenant was due to move in on February 1st. Police say they have solid leads and are investigating several persons of interest, who they declined to name.

Miss Granger, who worked for the law firm Thomas Phelps and Associates as a paralegal, went missing on January 3rd, after being dropped off in Lincoln Park by American Taxi. Her parents reported her missing on January 5th when she failed to arrive at their Naperville home for a family dinner.

"Is that you?" Kara asked after I finished reading the article aloud while we waited for the police evidence tech on Monday morning. "The 'person of interest'?"

"Yes, but my alibi is airtight," I replied. "I'd say the reason the cops want my DNA, the video, and to talk to the people to confirm my whereabouts is because they have no suspects. The question to which the answer may never be

discovered is why she went to Lincoln Park, unless she told the cabbie. I asked Danielle yesterday afternoon, and she didn't know."

"Is Danielle going to be OK?"

"I think so. John and Tabitha will take care of her, and I let her know I'd help in any way I can."

"She's seeing someone, right? I mean dating, not a counselor."

"Yes. A guy named Tony who works with John."

"That was the guy in his late forties she had with her on New Year's?"

"Yes. She had made the point she wanted an older man to Tabitha, and John introduced her to Tony."

"What happened with your art student?"

"Given recent events, we didn't have a chance to talk, and I basically derailed Philosophy Club by raising the issue of wanting to start a third chapter. I'll call her once things settle down and make arrangements to see her artwork."

The doorbell rang, and I went to answer it and let Julius into the house. He joined us in the kitchen for coffee, and about ten minutes later, the doorbell rang, and there was a knock, the telltale sign of the Chicago Police Department.

"Here we go," I said as I got up.

I went to the foyer, followed by Julius, and opened the door to find the two detectives and a young guy with thick glasses who looked like a classic nerd.

"Good morning, Mr. Adams," Detective León said, then nodded, "Mr. Crane."

I let them in and shut the door behind them.

"We have a slight change of plan," Detective Madison said. "We'll scrub through the video at high speed, and if it confirms what you've told us, we won't need full copies."

"Why is that?"

"Your alibi checks out. We spoke to the master of the dōjō, the owner of the restaurant, and the cabbie."

"And the DNA?"

"We'll take that to positively rule you out."

"Do you have any suspects besides me?"

"I'm sure you know we're not at liberty to say."

"Then let's get started."



Birgit

"What happened with your dad and Jesse?" I asked Zahra at lunch.

"Jesse was fine, but you know the problem. I can still come over for homework, so long as Zaida is with me all the time."

"What about Friday nights?"

"My dad is going to talk to Jamal's dad, and so long as Jamal is there and I'm with Zaida, I can go. That means no movies because Zaida isn't usually allowed to go."

"That stinks! What about the Girl Gang?"

"So long as it's all girls and no boys at all, it's fine."

"Ugh. Does Jesse know?"

"No. I didn't think it was wise to call him. Will he be home tomorrow when we do homework?"

"Probably."

"Do you think you could ask him to come to the house so I can talk to him?"

"Sure. And I won't rat you out!"

"I was positive! Thanks."

We took our trays and went to sit with our usual lunch group, which included my sisters and their friends, as well as my friends.

 Steve

"Thank you for your coöperation, Mr. Adams," Detective Madison said. "The videos confirm your statements, so we would like the fifteen minutes before she arrives until the cab leaves. And ask you to save the complete videos."

"I'll do that," I agreed.

We spent the next thirty minutes making the tape, and then the evidence tech swabbed the inside of my cheek to collect DNA.

"Is there anything else, Detective?" Julius asked.

"Just the contact information for the man who was here just before Miss Granger arrived."

I wondered how Jamaal Rahim would take the questioning, but there was no reasonable way to refuse. I wrote out his name and phone number and handed it to the detective.

"Anything else?" Julius asked.

"No, Mr. Crane; that's it."

"Would you please call me with the results of the DNA test?"

"Yes, though if there's a match, which we don't expect, we'll arrest Mr. Adams before we call you."

"He'll turn himself in," Julius said.

"I believe you, but for rape-murder, we can't do that."

That confirmed what I had suspected, which they had never formally said. As there was nothing else, I escorted them to the door, and once they left, Julius and I went to my study.

"I haven't shared the details of what Nadia was doing here, and they haven't asked, which actually surprised me."

"Because it's not relevant if your DNA matches. They're playing it cagey, and honestly, the police don't need a motive if they have a DNA match. That's up to the prosecution, but with DNA, they don't need much beyond showing some relationship between having sex and her time of death. Are you thinking of volunteering the information?"

"Yes, but it's likely to sound incriminating."

"Then I suggest you wait until they rule you out via DNA matching before you say anything. If they happen to ask, tell them that on the advice of counsel, you decline to answer until after the DNA results are returned. The last thing you want is for them to arrest you and then drag out the DNA testing for weeks and weeks while you sit in jail with no bail for rape-murder."

"Do you want to know now?"

"Yes. Unless you're discussing the commission of a crime in the future or you propose perpetrating fraud on the court or tampering with witnesses, I'm obligated to keep anything you say confidential."

"She had a pair of fantasies she wanted to play out - one was the virginal babysitter seducing the dad who drove her home."

Julius laughed, "And the main reason it's the *mom* who drives the babysitter home these days!"

"Yeah," I chuckled. "That one was something I could actually roleplay. Her other request was one in which I simply couldn't participate -- to lose her virginity while tied spread-eagled to a bed."

"Hang on! How do you roleplay THAT?"

"You don't. She wanted to live out that fantasy."

"She was a virgin?"

"So she claimed, and I'm positive you know it's impossible to know one way or the other in the vast majority of situations where the girl is over the age of consent. Nadia was twenty, and I only have her word for it."

"That's why she left? You declined?"

"Yes. And there are Instant Messages which reference her fantasies, but no details. As far as I'm aware, Danielle did not know."

"You absolutely do *not* want to share that with the detective until the DNA test results are available. I'm not sure you should share it with them unless they ask. Why would you want to?"

"To give them something to go on to find her murderer, but also to say that it might not have been rape if they're basing that determination on ligature marks on her wrists or ankles. That would also be relevant to the defense of any suspect."

"You won't like what I'm going to say, but other suspects are not your concern."

"Understood, but you know once they rule me out, they're going to come back and ask. Getting out ahead of it seems to make sense to me."

"And, from your perspective, where you know you didn't do it, that makes sense. But they still think you *might* have done it. Confirming your alibi is persuasive

but not conclusive. If it were conclusive, they wouldn't have done the DNA swab. Wait for the DNA tests, and, as I said, if they come back with questions, decline to answer until after the tests. You can refer them to me, obviously."

"OK. Thanks for being here today,"

"You're welcome! I'm going to head out."

I walked him to the door, we shook hands, and once he'd left, I went back to my study.

 Jesse

"Angelina is in a foul mood," Luna observed at our lockers after school. "I saw you chatting on Friday night. Did something happen?"

"She asked to talk, and we had lunch yesterday. She wants to be a couple, and you know my take on that."

"Not until after at least two years of college, and probably all four."

"Yep."

"I'd love to be your girlfriend, but I knew going in that wasn't the possibility. But I liked YOU going in, so..."

I laughed, "And I liked it, too."

"My parents will be out late Friday night. Could we get together after the movie?"

"Sure. I can drive you home afterwards to avoid curfew."

"I turned eighteen during break, so not necessary!"

Simone walked up, so I said 'goodbye' to Luna, and Simone and I headed for my house.

"I need to leave by 4:45pm," she said. "My mom is home around 5:30pm, and I want to make sure I'm at my desk doing my homework!"

"That gives us about two hours," I said.

"More than enough for you to fuck me three times! And use your mouth! You'll earn your reward again!"

"I won't turn that down!"

"No boy would!"

 Birgit

"What are you doing home?" I asked Dad when I came into the house with Fangsu after Photography club.

"The detectives were here until about 1:00pm," I said.

"Did you find out anything more about what happened?"

"The police believe she was raped before she was murdered."

"Cut his nuts off!" I growled.

"A sentiment held by most women," I said. "He'll get life in prison, for sure."

"And hopefully have a three-hundred-pound cellmate named 'Bubba' who won't take 'no' for an answer!"

"No matter what someone has done, they do not deserve to be raped. How was Photography Club?"

"We're talking about lighting, including using filters. Sorry, but I need to do geometry and biology homework."

"OK."

I left Dad's study, and Fangsu and I went to my room, rather than sit in the sunroom, because I needed to use my computer to write a lab report. About forty minutes later, I finished it and started on my geometry problems.

"Can I ask a question," Fangsu said.

"Sure. What?"

"I, uhm, want to do it with Mitch, but he's, er, big, and I'm kind of afraid."

"First, have you both had STI tests? And agreed on birth control?"

"Yes."

"Then do you remember what Aunt Bethany's book said? That if a baby is able to be born, it's impossible for a guy to be 'too big'."

"Sure, but I've never even used a tampon or anything," Fangsu said.

"Get some lubricant," I said. "You can get it at CVS, or if you're embarrassed, I have a brand-new tube I can give you. The same is true if you need condoms."

"I thought you were on the Pill!"

"I am, but Dad keeps condoms and lubricant in the closet with Band-Aids and stuff. He makes sure they're there in case anyone needs them."

"My parents are pretty open-minded, but not *that* open-minded!" Fangsu declared. "Your dad is totally cool and a hunk, for an old guy!"

I laughed, "He's not even forty yet! My grandpa -- his dad -- is eighty-five!"

"OK, but I meant, you know, for *that*."

I laughed again, "I'm pretty sure he can still do it! My moms seem VERY happy!"

"That is not what I meant!" Fangsu declared. "I meant ME! I'm the same age as you, and that's just too old! I could see going out with a Senior, but a guy that old? No way!"

I shrugged, "I think older guys are the best!"

"How old was the oldest guy you've been with?"

"Pinky-swear you will NEVER say anything?"

"Yes!"

We locked our pinkies and shook.

"Thirty-six," I said.

"WHOA!" Fangsu gasped. "And?"

"The absolute best sex I've had, bar none! I want to be with him again, but it'll probably be over a year from now before I can arrange it again."

"You really didn't think it was gross?"

"No way, or I wouldn't have done it. But each of us has to decide for ourselves. Has Mitch done it before?"

"No."

"Then my advice, if you want your first time to last more than a few seconds, is to give him a blowjob first. Then he can last a lot longer!"

"I remember the book discussed premature ejaculation."

"It's *always* premature, no matter how long it takes if you haven't had an orgasm!"

"Did you have one the first time?"

"With a guy? Yes. But remember, it's up to you to guide him to what you need, and if you don't orgasm from screwing, he should use his mouth. You'll probably have to tell him, so if you don't know from rubbing yourself, do that so you know what it takes. The other thing to remember is what the book said -- make sure you have enough time so you aren't rushed and are in a place where you won't be interrupted."

"That's the problem because his mom doesn't work, and my brother is home."

"You could use one of our guest rooms," I offered. "Nobody would bother you."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. Mitch can confirm with Jesse."

"And your parents will be cool with it?"

"They won't mind," I said.

"Thanks. Sorry I kept you from your geometry."

"Sadly, it's not going anywhere! I loved algebra, but geometry is a pain in the butt!"



January 14, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

There was a knock at the back door just as Missy and I began doing our homework after integrating for an hour. I excused myself and went downstairs.

"What's up?" I asked Birgit, who had let herself in and was waiting in the kitchen.

"Will Miss Tuesday be OK if you come over to the house to talk to Zahra?"

"Yes," I chuckled. "I'll let Missy know, then come over. I take it her dad is interfering?"

"Pretty much," Birgit agreed. "She and Zaida will be in the Indian room."

I went upstairs to let Missy know I needed to go to the main house, then went back downstairs. I walked across the yard, went into the house, then joined Zahra and Zaida in the Indian room. Zaida stepped just outside the room to give us privacy, but where she could see Zahra.

"Hi," Zahra said.

"Hi," I replied. "What did your dad say?"

"I can only be with the group if I'm with Zaida and Jamal. He spoke to Jamal's dad, and Jamal will walk Zaida and me home after we eat on Fridays. And I can't go anywhere there are boys without Zaida with me. I can come to your hockey games, but only with my dad, and we can't go out to lunch."

"I guessed that was what was going to happen," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Zahra said. "But I still want to see you."

"It's up to you," I said. "You have to decide to follow your dad's rules or not and be prepared for the consequences. And what happens when he asks Zaida if she was with you the whole time?"

Zahra smirked, "Well, he did say I had to be with her, and she had to do whatever I was doing!"

I laughed, "There is no possible way he meant THAT!"

"Obviously!" Zahra declared.

"I think, in the end, you and Zaida have to work that out between you. I'll be home at my usual time tomorrow."

"OK. I'll talk to Zaida."

I said 'goodbye' to her, then returned to the coach house to complete my homework with Missy, then integrated once more before walking her home.



January 15, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

I had just signed on to my computer on Wednesday morning when *adium* chimed.

Rayleigh1: Hi! It's Emma!

NIKASteve: Hi! I see you changed your AIM nickname!

Rayleigh1: I have two accounts now. The other one I use with Dad. How are you?

NIKASteve: Great! And you?

Rayleigh1: Counting down the days! Only 143 days until I move to Chicago!

NIKASteve: I'm looking forward to it!

Rayleigh1: I IM'd Natalie, and she said she's going to Russia this Summer.

NIKASteve: Yes, and Yuriko is going to Japan. We'll have a house guest, though.

Rayleigh1: Another member of the subversive cell?

NIKASteve: Yes. She'll start at Stanford in the Fall but wants mentoring during the Summer.

Rayleigh1: 😏 'Mentoring'

NIKASteve: As my daughter would say, 'What-ever!'

Rayleigh1: So long as you have time for me, it doesn't bother me. I mean, I'm sleeping with a married man, so it's not as if I have ANY room to talk!

NIKASteve: Married, but unconventionally.

Rayleigh1: I'll say! Mrs. Spencer knows everything, right?

NIKASteve: More than most!

Rayleigh1: Was she your MILF? 😏

NIKASteve: I certainly noticed how beautiful she was!

Beyond that, no comment!

Rayleigh1: Uh-huh. Ever had both a mother and daughter?

NIKASteve: Again, no comment!

Rayleigh1: 😏 I need to get going. School awaits! L8r!

NIKASteve: L8r!

I minimized *adium* and opened *Outlook* to check my calendar for the day, and with no meetings, I called Shaye's number. I reached an answering machine and left her a message, asking her to call when she had a chance and apologizing once again for Sunday.

"Morning!" Penny exclaimed, coming into the office. "I see they're knocking down exterior walls on the annex."

"They're on track because we haven't had any 'Snow Emergency days.'"

"I'm still annoyed you didn't have the sauna built in our office!"

I chuckled, "Can you imagine Bob's reaction to *that*, especially if it was used the way I use my sauna at home? Just be happy we still have our private bathroom! And wet bar!"

"At least *you* leave the seat down!"

I chuckled, "Given the male-female ratio in my house, compared to yours, it shouldn't surprise you."

"I just want a day when I can go into ANY of our bathrooms and not find pee on the floor! I swear it's on purpose!"

"With Andrew and Stephen, I suspect it's more not caring. I can't speak for Terry."

"He did say he'd be OK with the deal Birgit suggested," Penny smirked.

"And you know why it's a bad idea," I replied.

"Seriously? Your rule is consent, not acquiescence, and he'll tell you straight up he's absolutely OK with it!"

"And when you go back and ask *again*?" I inquired. "Because you know you will!"

"But if I promised?"

"Could you actually make and keep that promise? Be honest, please."

"But if Terry is OK with it..."

"Penny, setting aside the problems we'd have with Bob, would Terry be OK with you focusing all your attention on me? I mean, more than you do because we work together?"

"But I wouldn't!"

"Yes, you would," I countered. "And you know you would."

"And if I made Amber contingent..."

"Then you get to explain to her why. Remember, I said I'd follow your guidance on that, and if you say 'no', then it's 'no', but I will tell her why."

Penny glared at me, "You're being mean!"

"You know better, Pretty Penny. I love you dearly, but no. We have work to do."

"Just no fun!" she grouched. "No fun at all!"

 Jesse

When I arrived home on Wednesday, I fixed myself a snack, then sat down to read *The Scarlet Letter* for English class. I didn't like it, but I had no choice but to read it. I didn't particularly like Early American literature, so it was something of a slog. I read for about thirty minutes before Albert came to the door.

"Zahra is here and wants to talk to you," he said. "She and her friend are in the sunroom."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be right over."

I put a bookmark in my book, used the john, then walked across the yard. I went into the house, then to the sunroom.

"Hi," I said.

"Is there someplace we could go in this house?" Zahra asked.

"Yes," I replied. "There's a room off the kitchen we can use. Zaida could sit in the kitchen."

"That's fine," Zaida said. "I can do my homework."

The three of us went to the kitchen, and Zaida sat down. I asked if she needed something to drink, got her some lemonade, then went into what Aunt Kara called the Playroom with Zahra. I shut and locked the door behind us, then led her to the bedroom.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Zahra asked.

"Having to lie and directly disobey your dad? And knowing we can't spend any time together unless you sneak here? And then only for sex?"

Zahra frowned, "I don't know what to do. I want to be with you. Don't you want to be with me?"

"Yes, I do. I'm worried about you."

"You mean because I'm in love with you?" Zahra said quietly.

She said what I knew to be true and had more or less ignored because she said she knew nothing would ever come of the relationship.

I nodded, "Yes."

"You knew?" she asked.

"I had a pretty good idea," I replied. "But that was after we'd been together a few times. You know the problem."

"I know, Zahra sighed. "I don't think it's right that if you were the girl and I was the guy, it would be OK."

"Me, either," I replied. "But even then, it would be a problem."

"Why?"

"Because I want to be able to go to church as a family, just as I'm sure you want to be able to attend your mosque as a family. We had agreed it was just about being together, but then it changed for you. I like you a lot, I mean that, and I want to spend time with you, but your dad won't allow it."

"I want to spend time with you, too, but unless one of us changes religion, we aren't going to be able to do that except in secret, and your parents would never permit you to go to my church, even if you wanted to."

"I know," Zahra sighed. "Make love to me? Please?"

 Steve

Shaye returned my call just before 4:30pm.

"I'm really sorry about Sunday," I said.

"Everything is OK, right? I mean, with the cops?"

"Yes. They asked a bunch of questions and asked more on Monday. Unfortunately, I don't think they have any leads."

"That's scary. Deanna told me about a girl who was raped and murdered when she was in her first year. They questioned her patron but cleared him. When can we get together?"

"If you don't have class tomorrow afternoon, could I see your artwork?"

"THAT is why you want to get together? Seriously?"

"Given my schedule, yes. The next few weeks are going to be busy because I have to fly to Florida on Sunday afternoon for our annual corporate retreat. I have plans for most of the following weekend, and then I'm going to Arizona. After that, I have to fly to Rochester for a checkup at Mayo."

"So when do you actually have time for what you obviously wanted?"

"Remember, I was surprised that it worked! Let's get together tomorrow, look at your art, and then we'll figure out what's next. How about 3:30pm tomorrow?"

"Sure. Meet at the school? I have shared studio space there."

"Sounds good."

 Jesse

"Can I see you against next Wednesday?" Zahra asked as we got out of bed after two rounds of gentle sex.

"I want to, but I'm worried about you."

"You mean because of how I feel? Or because of my dad?"

"Both, really," I said as I led her to the shower.

I turned on the tap and adjusted the temperature, then held out my arms. Zahra stepped into them and sighed deeply.

"It's my fault, really," she said. "I knew nothing could ever come of this, but I wanted to be with you, and then I fell in love with you. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize for your feelings," I said.

I carefully moved us into the shower and closed the glass door, allowing warm water to cascade over our bodies.

"It really is up to you at this point, but please take everything into consideration."

"Can I tell you something funny?"

"Sure," I said as I began soaping Zahra's sexy body.

"I teased Zaida about being with me at all times, you know, like my dad said."

Visions of having *both* girls popped immediately into my head because Zaida was nearly as sexy as Zahra, at least as best I could judge, with her always wearing a scarf and loose-fitting clothing.

"Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen!" I said.

Zahra laughed, "No because she is adamant that she be pure for her husband. But the desire is there."

"Because she's a normal teenager!" I declared. "So, teasing Zahra about it aside, what do you want to do?"

"If I could have anything I wanted?"

"Sure," I said.

"For you to become Muslim and eventually have a family together. I know that won't happen, but if I could have anything, that's what I would want."

"You're fifteen, and I'm not quite seventeen," I replied. "We're way too young to think about that seriously."

"Not in my faith and culture," Zahra said as she began rinsing off the suds. "It's normal for girls to marry at sixteen, or sometimes younger, in the village where my parents are from and where I was born."

"It's legal to get married here at sixteen with parental approval, but I think people would completely freak out if anyone tried that now, at least in Chicago. I'm positive DCFS would get involved and cause all kinds of trouble."

Zahra finished rinsing off and began soaping my body.

"Also," I continued, "even if it were possible, and I did what you said, I wouldn't be able to support a family until I graduate from college."

"I know," Zahra replied. "But I would love to be able to sleep in the same bed with you! And then my dad couldn't say anything! I like being with you that way!"

"And I like being with you, too," I said. "So, setting aside the fantasy, what do you want to do?"

"I guess I need to think about it," Zahra said.

She finished soaping me, I rinsed off, and then hugged her under the cascading spray for a minute. I turned off the tap, we got out, dried off, then dressed. Zahra helped me change the sheets, then we went out to the kitchen.

"Have fun?" Birgit asked with a smirk.

I simply rolled my eyes, hugged Zahra, then headed to the coach house.

 Birgit

"Thanks for letting us come over while you were at Photography Club," Zahra said.

"You're welcome. Will you be here for homework tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"And next Wednesday?" I asked with a smirk.

"Can I talk to you privately?"

"Sure. We can use my dad's study."

"Zaida, wait here, OK?" Zahra asked.

Zaida agreed, and Zahra and I went to my dad's study, where I shut the door.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I'm afraid of what my dad might do if he found out about Jesse and me."

"Do you think he'd hurt you?"

"Maybe, or hurt Jesse."

"I know you want to keep seeing Jesse, but you know he's not going to become a Muslim, right? And you aren't going to become a Christian, so as much fun as it is, maybe you should stop."

"But I love him!" Zahra protested.

Warning bells flashed, and I wondered if Jesse knew.

"You're fifteen, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

I thought back to my talks with Fatimah, and Zahra's situation wasn't quite as extreme, but she was, in effect, in the same trap. And a trap she could only escape by walking away from Islam. And at fifteen, living at home, that would be tough.

"As much as I hate to say it," I said, "there isn't really anything you can do unless you can change your dad's mind and you're willing to become a Christian."

"I can't do that," Zahra said. "My dad..."

"Would you do that for Jesse?"

"I don't know," Zahra sighed.

I needed to talk to Jesse before I said anything.

"I don't know what else to say," I said. "You can hang out with us as much as you want and be here whenever you want."

"Thanks, Birgit."

"You're welcome."

We left the study, got the other girls, and went to the sunroom to do homework.

 Jesse

"Hey," Birgit said, coming down to the Duck's Nest after dinner.

"Let me guess," I said. "Zahra?"

"Yeah. Are you aware she's in love with you?"

"I know," I replied. "But you know the problem, I'm sure."

"Belief in god," I said. "In theory, you both believe in the same god, but there's a disagreement depending on which prophet you think is authoritative -- Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed. I think all three of them are wrong! Along with, Siddhartha Gautama, Zarathustra, Bahá'u'lláh..."

"I get it!" I said, interrupting. "Accepting your point for the purposes of this discussion, what *you* think doesn't matter. You know what I believe and what Zahra believes, but even if that wasn't a problem, I'm not going to effectively get engaged when I'm not even seventeen! I am NOT Matthew!"

"I know you aren't a «jävla idiot», so I'm positive you didn't promise her anything. But you have a real problem."

"I know, and I'm not sure what I can do. And even if I wanted to be a couple, the only way that could happen is if I converted to Islam, and that is not happening. I know you don't believe in God, but my church is rational."

"Right, because they approve of your moms and will let them marry?"

"Even if they did, the government won't allow it, which is actually the bigger problem. You know I disagree with my church on sexual ethics, but otherwise, I don't think there's anything to which you object. Well, besides the whole idea of God. But that's not the point, really; it's that I don't think Islam properly addresses the human condition the way the Orthodox Church does. But it doesn't matter."

"What are you going to do? If her dad ever finds out, he'll lose his shit. And she's only going to be more attached if you continue 'kissing' her."

Birgit made air quotes, and I laughed.

"We haven't called it that for a LONG time!" I said. "And I know. This is one of those times when Dad would say I didn't think things through all the way."

"How so? I'm sure you didn't make any promises to her, and I know for a fact she came to you. She said she wanted you long before it happened."

"Again, assuming for the sake of argument that's true, I should have realized how things might go. I had similar problems with Angelina and, to some extent, CeCe. Francesca was a different story."

"And her lunatic mom wrecked things because she was determined to ensure Francesca never had sex in her entire life!"

"I don't think she was quite that insane, but close!" I said. "My point is, some girls can't handle casual sex. And you know full well that some guys can't, either. Oh, sure, they'll screw if you offer, but Philip had a similar reaction."

"I know," I replied. "He's not religious, but he fell in love with me. But I goofed because I didn't make it clear that I didn't want a permanent boyfriend, but now I'm not so sure."

"Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?!"

"I know, right? I put myself in a bad position again."

"Now what?"

"I invited Bob to go to Saint Martin, but he can't be my boyfriend because of Meghan, and if I ask Tomás to be my boyfriend, I can't take Bob to Saint Martin, and it would be the second time I basically blow him Bob for another guy."

"But neither of them cares that you're seeing another guy, right?"

"I don't think so, but I didn't see that coming with Peter and Julie. Not to mention, I'm going to Sweden for a year and don't want a long-distance relationship. That's what I told Philip, and he stopped speaking to me."

"He thought having sex made you a permanent couple?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "I mean, I suspect so, but he wouldn't even talk to me."

"Well," I smirked. "There are always girls!"

Birgit laughed, "Lilibeth said the same thing! But I think she has a vested interest!"

"You think?" I grinned.

"Can I ask you a question about her? Well, and Libby?"

"Sure, Sis. What?"

"If Lilibeth liked guys, too, would you consider what Libby wants?"

I shook my head, "No. I think a committed, monogamous relationship is best for me, the same as you do. We both agreed that's after college, though I'd consider starting that kind of relationship as a Junior or Senior. You think it's after you get your first job, but we agree on the basic idea. What's *actually* bugging you?"

"If I knew, my life would be a lot easier. What are you going to do about Zahra?"

"I have no clue. I don't want to hurt her, but I don't see how that can be avoided if she's in love with me. But I have some time to think about it before I see her again in a situation where we can actually talk. She'll have Zaida and Jamal with her on Friday, and she has to go home with Zaida right after dinner."

"Mr. Rahim is just as dumb as every other parent who thinks they can prevent their kids from having sex!"

"Oh, I know."

"Sorry, I need to leave for karate," Birgit said.

"OK."



January 16, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

"Steve, I have Julius Crane on the phone for you," Kimmy said just after lunch on Thursday.

"Put him through, please."

She put the call through, and I picked up the handset.

"Hi, Julius. What's up?"

"Hi, Steve. Detective León called to let me know that the preliminary DNA test showed no chance of a match. I'd say that, combined with the video you provided and the fact your friends verified your whereabouts, is the end of it for you. All the physical evidence is exculpatory, so, with the obvious lawyerly caveats, there is basically no chance you'd be charged."

"That's good. What about the additional information?"

"That's the second reason for my call. They, together with the investigator from DeKalb, would like to set a time to meet with you to ask you about the Instant Messages."

"What risks do I run?"

"None that I can think of," Julius replied. "I spoke with Mike Knox, and I conferred with Melanie Spencer. Everything thinks it's safe to disclose what you

know. I would advise you to have counsel with you; Liz can do it if you want to save some money."

"I think I'd rather have a criminal defense attorney present," I said. "I'm OK with you continuing, as Melanie hasn't been directly involved."

"Are you free tomorrow?"

"Yes. Where?"

"I'll ask that we either do it at your office or our office. We don't want to be in a police interview room where they control everything and could record you without your agreement."

"Total BS, but I agree the courts have said the cops can lie and cheat and break the law to investigate and are almost never held accountable."

"You're talking to a former Public Defender, so I know exactly what you mean, but you'll want to keep that opinion to yourself during the interview."

"I promise to behave."

Julius laughed, "I suspect you say that to Liz fairly often."

"You suspect correctly. What time?"

"It'll be in the morning. Let me arrange it with the detectives, and I'll call you back."

"Thanks."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"Trouble?" Penny asked.

"No, Just the usual craziness that is my life! You remember I'm out on Monday and Tuesday for the annual NIKA executive retreat, right?"

"I'll actually get some work done!" Penny teased.

"You know, if it's a problem, there's still time to update the seating chart!"

"You won't do that because you love me!"

"That's true. Shall we get back to work?"

"Yes!"

XVIII. Controlled Behavior

January 16, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Thursday afternoon, I left the office and hailed a cab to take me to the Art Institute so I could see Shaye's paintings. She met me in the lobby, greeted me with a quick hug, then walked me to the shared studio where she painted. As she'd said, her work was an eclectic mix of styles, and from my perspective, she had talent.

"I'm no critic," I said, "but these are very good."

"EVERYONE is a critic," Shaye countered. "And you don't have to butter me up! You had me at 'take a step to your left!'"

"I was being honest," I said. "I think you have talent. Are there any rules about patronage?"

"You mean the school? No. Hell, my professors would KILL to have a patron. They're all jealous of Deanna because she found hers when she was nineteen. He was only a year older, so I suspect he's the same age as you, give or take, but was already super successful."

"Not to compete, but I had my first computer company in High School and my two friends who ran it with me and I sold it to pay for college. Then I started a new company."

Shaye laughed, "It's always a 'dick size' war!"

"Nah, he's worth WAY more than I am at this point, and that doesn't bother me. I was simply pointing out that I'm a successful entrepreneur and can afford the kind of patronage you'd need."

"Besides the obvious, what's in it for you?"

"Supporting the arts," I replied. "It's something successful capitalists should do."

"You don't strike me as a Republican."

"Good thing, because I'm not! I despise the current occupant of the White House, though the alternative wasn't much better. My politics are based on classical liberal ideas, which often are called 'libertarian', but I don't like that label. I'm for small government, individual liberty, and the free movement of goods, ideas, capital, and people. My guiding principle is to leave people alone as I want to be left alone. Basically, anything consenting adults want to do ought to be permitted."

"Yeah, not Republican, for sure!"

"And not Democrat, either. People ought to keep most of what they earn and run their businesses as they see fit. That said, I also strongly support unions."

"Weird."

"Keep that word in mind," I chuckled. "You'll use it often if you're sucked into my universe!"

"I think that was MY role!" Shaye smirked.

"As I said the other day, my schedule is a complete mess for the next two weeks, as I have to go to Florida and Arizona on business, and the weekends are tied up with family stuff. Things chill a bit after February 5th."

"I could miss a few days of school if you wanted a traveling companion!"

Florida wouldn't work because it was a NIKA event, but Arizona might. I was flying out on Sunday afternoon and returning on Tuesday morning, and the only plans I had were a half-day meeting at GlucoTech. The only downside would be not seeing CeCe, but there was no guarantee she'd be available.

"If you're serious, I fly to Arizona the afternoon of Sunday, February 2, and fly home the morning of Tuesday, February 4."

"Tuesdays and Thursdays are studio time, so I'd only miss one day of classes."

I didn't need permission from my wives for overnights that didn't interfere with their time, and they knew about Shaye, so technically, I could just agree. I decided the better course was to call Kara and verify.

"Let me call Kara, then check on the flights," I said, taking my mobile phone from my pocket.

I called Kara, who answered right away and laughed when I explained the plan. As I had expected, she agreed immediately. I ended the call, then called Liesel at Windy City Travel. I asked her to book a companion ticket for me on both flights, something I could do via my American Airlines AAdvantage program combined with my Admiral's Club membership. She confirmed the flight and changed the hotel from a single to a double, though there was no increase in price. I thanked her, then disconnected the call.

"All set," I said.

"First Class? That can't be cheap!"

"My seat is paid for by my client, and your seat is free because of my membership status with American Airlines."

"Get out!"

"I travel often enough on my own to have some perks, and combined with the miles staff at my company fly, American loves us, as does our travel agent. You will have to fend for yourself on Monday morning because I have a meeting from nine until eleven. There may be a dinner, and if there is, you can be my guest. I take it you have a skirt and blouse?"

Shaye laughed, "I don't go for the grunge look the way Deanna did back in the day, though I don't think they called it that back then."

"In the olden days?" I asked with a smirk.

"I was born in 1984, which was when that scene started in Seattle. And I don't think you're old. Thirty-five?"

"Thirty-nine."

"You don't look it! So, how will this work?"

"I can pick you up on the way to O'Hare on the 2nd. You should definitely attend Philosophy Club on the 26th. As for the arrangement, we can discuss that in Arizona if that's OK."

"Sampling the wares to see if they're worth it?" Shaye asked lightly with an arched eyebrow.

"There is no *quid pro quo*," I said. "I'm happy to discuss being a patron of the arts without sex."

"You do realize that I *want* to fuck you, right?"

"You made that clear, along with other activities!"

Shaye laughed. "And I swallow like a normal girl!"

"Good to know, though I've maintained that any guy who complains about the ending of a blowjob is an idiot who doesn't deserve one!"

"And cream pies?" she asked with a smirk.

I chuckled, "Not a big deal, given the number of snowballs I've had."

"OK, now I have to ask, just how adventurous are you?"

"With a few red lines, very! But there is one thing I need to mention, which shouldn't be a problem."

"What's that?"

"The price of freedom is a recent clean STD test."

Shaye shrugged, "As you suspected, not a problem. My friends and I are all tested regularly. I'll get one before we go. And I'm on the Pill, so no worries there."

"Double no worries -- I had a vasectomy right after my youngest daughter was born. And I hate to run, but I need to head home for dinner and then get to the dōjō to teach my karate class."

"See you on the 26th, and I'm looking forward to Arizona!"

"Me, too!"

We hugged, I left the Art Institute and caught a cab to Halsted, where I'd parked, then headed home. On the drive, Julius called to let me know that he'd arranged for an interview with the CPD and DeKalb County Sheriff for 9:30am at the McCarthy/Jenkins office in 311 South Wacker, a building which had the distinction of being the tallest building in the world known only by its street address. I thanked him, and we agreed to meet there at 9:00am.



January 17, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Is there any reason not to fully coöperate?" I asked Julius as we sat in a 'hotelling' office in his firm's space at 311 South Wacker on Friday morning.

"It's my advice that you answer their questions as succinctly and narrowly as possible and not offer any ideas or speculation. While it's true that your DNA didn't match, and they have testimony from the cabbie and the videotapes, that doesn't mean they believe you are innocent."

"Because our completely fucked-up legal system is not about justice or truth, but about arrests and convictions. That said, I promise no rants."

"Good. As I said, be completely honest, but don't volunteer any theories or ideas. Let them draw their own conclusions. Any you suggest will make them suspicious, especially if you're right. And yes, I know how perverse that is. Eight years as a PD taught me all about abusive and aggressive policing and abusive prosecution, as well as judges who don't want to look bad, so they let the police and prosecution get away with all manner of shenanigans."

"Do you know any more about what happened?"

"No. CPD is playing it close to the vest, which is normal. They hold back as much information as possible in order to weed out false confessions but also to be able to trap a person of interest into making some kind of incriminating statement. And remember, they can flat-out lie to you with impunity."

"Well, at least they aren't Feds, so none of the 'lying to the Feds' BS applies. And it's tough to make an 'obstruction of justice' charge stick for a misstatement."

"On that, be sure to say you don't know if you don't know."

I nodded, "I got it, Julius."

"And I'm sure Melanie and Liz have repeatedly told you that defense attorneys remind their clients repeatedly about how to conduct themselves."

I nodded, "Civil litigators, too."

About ten minutes later, Deputy Mark Randolph of the DeKalb Sheriff's Department and Detectives Marco León and Bill Madison of the Chicago Police Department arrived to conduct the interview.

"As we agreed, I will record this interview," Julius said after everyone greeted each other and a secretary had brought coffee.

"That was our agreement," Deputy Randolph said. "And you'll make a copy of the tape available to us within twenty-four hours."

"Yes," Julius agreed, pressing 'RECORD' on the tape machine. "Before we start, I want to have on the record that my client agreed to speak with you after you confirmed the following: there was no DNA match for my client and that the videotape from my client's security system, the cab driver, the owner of Bucktown Bistro, two physicians from UofC Hospital, and Mr. Jamaal Rahim confirmed my client's version of the events."

"That is accurate," Detectives León said.

It did not prevent them from considering me a suspect in some way, nor prevent the State's Attorney from obtaining an indictment, but it did set the ground rules and would help with a judge in jury if the police or prosecutors tired to tie it to me for lack of any viable suspects.

"Then proceed, please," Julius said.

"How did you meet Miss Nadia Granger?" Deputy Randolph asked.

"Exactly as I told you on the phone -- a mutual friend, Danielle Marlowe, suggested we get in touch. Danielle provided me with Nadia's AIM handle, and about two weeks later, I contacted Nadia, and we arranged to meet, though those plans were canceled."

"Why was that?"

"A client in California requested a meeting. I was already there, so I postponed my return flight by a day, which forced my meeting with Nadia to be canceled. We tried to connect a few times after that, but our schedules simply didn't line up, and I had several conflicts. Eventually, we agreed she'd come to my house on January 3rd."

"In your messages with her, you discussed something you referred to as a 'babysitter' fantasy. What was that?"

I wanted to laugh and say that any adult male who didn't know what it was had serious problems, but I knew that would not be appreciated.

"She had a fantasy of being a virgin teenage babysitter and seducing the dad when he drove her home."

"And you were willing to participate in that role play?"

"Yes."

"And the fantasy in which you said you were reluctant to engage?" Deputy Randolph inquired.

"A fantasy of losing her virginity while tied spread-eagled to a bed."

I saw a look pass between the two CPD detectives and had a pretty good idea that matched whatever evidence they had.

"What happened the evening of January 3rd?"

I took them through the visit from Jamal Rahim, Nadia's arrival, our conversation, and her abrupt departure when I'd refused to fulfill her bondage fantasy.

"You're married, right, Mr. Adams?" Detective Madison asked.

"I have what most people would refer to as an open marriage," I replied. "My wife was home at the time and aware of the request Nadia was making."

"And she was OK with that?" Detective León inquired.

"Yes. Our agreement allows for what we call 'dalliances'."

"Your wife lets you play around?" Deputy Randolph asked.

"Yes."

"And your relationship with Danielle Marlowe?"

"A dalliance," I replied. "At this point, we're friends but no longer intimate."

"How did you meet her?"

"Again, through a mutual friend."

"And you were intimate with that friend?"

"Yes, Deputy. And with the person who introduced us."

"You were interviewed by the FBI and Chicago Police Department on suspicion of kidnapping. Tell me about that."

"A young woman who I met in Ohio asked me to bring her to Chicago, and I agreed. The case was closed as the young woman was over eighteen and had traveled on her own volition."

"Were you ever intimate with Miss Granger?" Detective León asked.

"No," I replied. "Not even a kiss or a hug. In fact, I don't believe I even touched her in any way."

"Cycling back to when she left your house," Deputy Randolph said, "she told you she was heading home?"

"Yes. I offered to drive her to Union Station or call a cab, and she opted for the cab. I paid the cabbie in advance, giving him enough for both the fare and a generous tip. You can see that from the camera footage you have in your possession and the cabbie confirmed it, I'm sure."

"She gave no indication she was planning to do anything other than take the train home?"

"Correct."

"Going back to her fantasy of being tied up, did she give you more details?"

"Other than she wanted it to be with an older guy who tied her tightly to the bed so she couldn't move, no. Actually, I just remembered one thing -- she said she owned soft ropes we could use for that purpose."

Another look was exchanged between the two CPD detectives.

"Do you know if she had them with her?"

"I honestly don't know. She was carrying a shoulder bag, which I think would have been large enough to hold them, but I can't say for sure."

"Was she wearing any jewelry?" Detective Maddison asked.

"A necklace with a heart pendant outside her sweater. I don't know if she had on earrings, given her hair covered her ears. I don't recall seeing any rings or bracelets, but her wrists were covered by her sweater, so I can't be sure."

"Do you know a Jonathan Kane?" Detective León asked.

"I know who he is," I replied, surprised by the question. "I met him once, in passing, in the offices of the Lundgren Foundation about a year ago. May I ask how he's involved?"

"We'd prefer not to say at this time," Detective León replied.

I had a suspicion, but I wasn't going to speculate in front of law enforcement.

"What was Miss Granger's mood when she left your house?" Deputy Randolph asked.

"She was unhappy," I replied. "And curt."

"And she gave no indication of her plans?"

"Correct."

"How had she planned to get home?" Detective Maddison asked. "I mean, if things had gone the way she'd intended?"

"Her plan was to fulfill her bondage fantasy, then I'd drive her to her parents' house so we could roleplay her other fantasy in the bed she used as a teenager. After that, I'd have taken her home or to her car, but that was never made expressly clear."

"So, to your knowledge, she had no other plans than her meeting with you."

"That's correct."

"Is there anything else you can tell us? Anything at all?" Deputy Randolph asked.

"I don't believe so," I replied.

"I think that's all for now," he said. "We may have further questions."

"Contact me, please," Julius interjected. "My client is happy to cooperate, but I need to be present for any questions or discussions."

"Of course," Deputy Randolph agreed. "Mr. Adams, thank you for taking the time. If you think of anything you feel might be helpful or remember anything you haven't told us, please call me."

"I will."

Julius shut off the tape recorder, then showed them out and returned to the conference room.

"Jonathan Kane is an investor, right?"

I nodded, "He runs Clermont Capital. He worked for Samantha's dad but had a falling out with him back in the 80s. He left Spurgeon Capital and started his own firm. As I said in the interview, I met him once, in passing, in Jeri Lundgren's office."

"You asked if they'd reveal their interest; I know you well enough you have some theory."

"I'd bet he owns the building. The paper mentioned a holding company owned the building. I seriously doubt he's a suspect, but you never know."



January 18, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Matthew

"Thanks for agreeing to come to Jesse's game before we drive to Ohio," I said to Chelsea.

"So long as we're there in time for dinner with my parents, it's cool. We're only leaving about two hours later than planned.

"Hi, Matthew!" Dad said, sitting down next to me. "I thought you guys were on your way to Ohio."

"We decided to come watch Jesse's game. We were at Eduardo's townhouse, and we'll be at Aunt Jennie's by 5:00pm their time, at the latest. Did anyone else come with you?"

"Natalie, but she ran into some friends in the lobby. Are you going to the race in Rockingham?"

"We wouldn't miss it! And Eduardo has tickets for both the Canadian Grand Prix and the US Grand Prix. Are you going to any races?"

"Just the race in Joliet, because Samantha asked. I take it you'll be there, too?"

"Yes!"

"Hi, Matt!" Natalie exclaimed, sitting down next to Dad.

"Hi, Natalie! How's your sister's team doing?"

"So far, so good. They should make the regionals, and Nicole is really looking forward to playing Jesse!"

I laughed, "She's been trying to beat him for years!"

The warmups finished, the teams took their positions, and the puck dropped. We didn't have to wait long for serious action, as the teams traded three goals in the first six minutes, with Jesse's team scoring two.

"Sloppy play on both sides," Dad observed. "Both came out aggressively."

The game settled down and the period ended with the score 2-1.

"How is play practice going?" Dad asked.

"So far, so good."

"How is your friend Maggie?"

"Not good," I replied. "She doesn't talk to me, and she's having trouble with grades, at home, and at church."

"Is she seeing a counselor?"

"Not a good one," I replied. "Mom talked to Maggie's mom and suggested Maggie needed to see a psychologist, but they reject psychology. She's receiving counseling from her pastor."

"The whole 'psychology is just a way to make excuses for sinful behavior or thoughts' idea?" Dad asked.

"Yes. Maggie's mom basically told Mom to butt out. I talked to the school psychologist, but she can't do anything because Maggie's parents expressly forbade her from talking to Maggie."

"Not good," Dad observed.

"Not at all," I agreed.



Jesse

"Focus, guys!" I said in the locker room after the first period. "We played sloppy defense, and we're lucky they only got one!"

"Sorry, man," Freddy said. "Won't happen again."

"Men," Coach Nelson said, "if you want to crash out of the playoffs, sloppy defense will guarantee it! And it's not just on the defensemen. I want aggressive, not foolish! Three men in one corner of our attacking zone is NOT smart. That happened three times, and every time, they had a breakaway. Fortunately, Jesse stopped two out of three, but even Dominik Hašek and Jean-Sebastien Giguere can't stop every shot!"

We all changed our t-shirts, drank bottles of Gatorade, and then headed back onto the ice for the second period.

"On the plus side," Freddy observed, "Coach compared you to the Dominator!"

"Well, if we don't dominate Lane Tech, we're going nowhere!" I declared. "You and Mike need to pick up your game and don't cheat the blue line so much."

"We got this, Jesse!" Mike declared as the referee skated to center ice to drop the puck.

They did pick up the game, playing smarter, and throwing their bodies in front of several shots, making my job easier. Nicholas scored a goal, and we held off a furious four-minute assault by Lane Tech at the end of the period.

We gave up a single goal in the third, then scored on the empty net to win 4-2. We had one game remaining, against Saint Patrick Catholic, and we only needed a tie to ensure we advanced to the City Championship, but that kind of thinking was a sure way to lose. Coach only handed out one game puck, and that was to me because he was unhappy with how badly we'd played in the first period.

When we left the locker room, I saw Zahra and her dad but didn't even wave, as the last thing I wanted to do was attract attention from Mr. Rahim. Given I wasn't going to see her, I asked Libby, Lilibeth, and Luna, whom I'd given rides to the rink to have lunch, and they agreed. The four of us got into Aunt Kara's SUV and headed for Ricobene's.

 Birgit

"Hi!" I exclaimed when Kevin Fogerty walked into the dōjō on Saturday morning.

"Hi, Birgit."

"I spoke to Sensei Will, and we can spar at the end of class. I'm ready for you!"

Kevin laughed, "And I'm ready for you!"

We had sparred in December, and I'd lost 2-1 after having beaten him at the tournament. That made this the deciding match, so to speak, and I would have to be very smart and use every bit of skill to beat him. I walked Kevin over to Sensei Will and introduced them, and then I saw Miyu come into the dōjō. I went over and bowed to her.

"Welcome back, Miyu!" I said.

"Thank you. I'll bring Kenji this afternoon so you can see him."

"Awesome! Do you remember Kevin Fogerty from the tournament?"

"I do! Are you sparring?"

"After class."

"Great! Let's line up; it's almost time to begin."

I totally wasn't surprised when she was called to lead our meditation and exercises, though she wouldn't be able to spar for a few more months. About an hour later, Sensei Will ended class and informed everyone that Kevin and I would spar. We put on our gear and moved to the sparring mat. Dad and Miyu got the flags, with Dad scoring Kevin and Miyu scoring me.

The first two rounds were completely evenly matched, with neither of us scoring three points before time expired. That brought it to the third round, which would decide things. We'd go until someone scored three points, no matter how long it

took. I reviewed the first two rounds in my mind, and I couldn't come up with any weakness or tell. I was certain Kevin was having the same problem because we were basically evenly matched.

When the round began, we both moved cautiously and traded feints and weak strikes to try to gauge how the other person would respond. I thought back over the two full matches and the current partial match and decided I needed to try something radical and aggressive. Dad and Miyu had been working on it with me, but mostly Dad because Miyu had been away having her baby.

I used a simple combination that left me open to a strike, which I knew I could take and yield a point, but it would set up what I wanted to do. Kevin connected with his counter punch, then I dropped, put my hand on the mat, and executed a low spinning sweep kick, which caught him by surprise and took him to the mat, giving me two points for the takedown, making the score 2-1 in my favor.

Kevin hopped up with a rueful smile, and I repeated the sequence, but this time, instead of dropping for a low spinning kick, I faked it and simply made a side kick, catching him fully in the stomach for the final point. Sensei Will stepped up and held up my hand to signify that I had won. I bowed to Kevin, then went over to where Miyu and Dad were standing with my mom and sisters.

"Excellent move, Birgit!" Miyu said, congratulating me.

"Thank you for teaching it to me!"

"Great job!" Dad declared.

"Thanks, Dad!"

After receiving congratulations from everyone, I went to the locker room to shower and change, then met Kevin so we could have lunch at the diner.

"That was a good move," Kevin said. "I haven't learned it yet."

I suspected I knew a LOT of moves he hadn't learned, but I had to be circumspect with Kevin because of the dreaded 'age difference' thinking all adults seemed to engage in, except my parents and their friends.

"Thanks. It helps to have a dad who is 6th Dan and a mom who is 1st Dan, though she doesn't teach at all."

"Why is that?"

"She's more interested in exercise than the deeper precepts of the 'The Way'. Dad has a Saturday afternoon class for a small group of students who are equally serious. Sensei Miyu and I both attend."

"What's different about that class?" Kevin asked as we entered the diner.

"It's much tougher and requires a commitment to absolute obedience and discipline and applying the precepts of «Dōjō kun» and the «Shōtōkan nijū kun.»"

"You don't strike me as the type of girl who would obey *anyone!*"

"Yeah, well," I giggled. "But it's about emotional, mental, and spiritual growth. I'm sure you know the Five Maxims."

Kevin nodded as we sat down in the booth where the hostess led us.

"Seek perfection of character; be faithful; endeavor to excel; respect others; refrain from violent behavior."

"Exactly. And the ultimate aim of Shōtōkan?"

"The answer does not lie in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of the «karateka»."

"So, I'm working on it!" I declared. "But so is my dad, even though he's 6th Dan. All that is required is that we continue striving to improve until our last breath."

"And then?"

I shrugged, "Who knows? Nobody has presented convincing evidence that there is anything after death, but it's possible, because the universe is far more complex than we can even imagine. I just don't assign a benevolent deity as a way to explain that complex; it's more likely to be Loki than Yahweh!"

"Loki?"

"The Norse god of change and chaos; also known as the 'Trickster'. I don't think he's real, in the sense that he's some kind of actual being, but he personifies my perception of the universe better than anything else."

"You don't talk like any Freshman I've ever met!"

And I bet I didn't fuck like any Freshman he ever met, either! But I *had* to keep control of my mouth and brain, or I'd mess things up the way I had with Philip. I also didn't want to mess things up with Bob or Tomás, so I had to be smart about it.

"Because I'm not like any Freshman you've ever met!" I declared. "Seriously, do I ACT fourteen?"

"No. But..."

"I know, I know," I sighed. "You're a Senior. You're eighteen. But could we *please* set that aside and deal with reality, not some adult delusion where anyone under eighteen is somehow still a toddler? Please just treat me based on how I act and speak, not on some other person's notion of what it means to be a teenager."

"My parents..."

"I'm the girl, and it's supposed to be *my* parents who are concerned. They aren't."

Well, they might be concerned for Kevin, but not for me!

"Your dad wouldn't be concerned?"

"So long as you respected me, no, he wouldn't. And it's up to *me* to decide if you respect me or not."

"How does that even work?"

"Because my dad trusts me to make good decisions."

"I don't know," Kevin said.

We were interrupted by the waitress who took our orders, then the conversation continued.

"Let's just keep doing what we're doing, please," I requested. "I'll come to your dōjō next month as we planned, and we can have lunch."

"How will you get there?"

"I was thinking of just taking the keys to my dad's BMW but the government frowns on that!"

"You know how to drive?"

"Boys can do it, so how difficult could it be?" I teased.

"Hah hah."

"No, I can't. But either my brother or one of the college students who live at our house -- Suzanne or Yuriko -- will drive me. Dad has to teach, of course."

"Do you know which day?"

I pulled out my small pocket calendar and checked when Jesse's playoff games would be.

"February 15th would work for me."

"Great!"

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"What are you kids doing this weekend?" Aunt Jennie asked as we sat down for dinner.

"Tonight, after dinner, we're going to visit Joe and Amelia, and I think Deb and Krissy will be there with their boys," Chelsea said. "Tomorrow morning, we're just hanging out, then in the afternoon, we're hanging out with Pavel, Larisa, and their friends. On Monday we're having breakfast with Matt's grandpa, lunch with Marcie and her boyfriend, then heading home."

"Just your grandpa, Matt?" Kent asked.

"My grandma does not appreciate anything about our extended family," I said.
"She's invited, but I don't know if she'll be there or not. Mike and I try."

"And the others?"

"Ashley and Stephe both try, but Birgit and Jesse have more or less given up. Albert has ZERO time for anyone who isn't 'squared away', and Grandma Adams absolutely doesn't fit!"

"He's working on achieving Eagle Scout, right?"

"Yes. He's doing his service project now at the hospital where Aunt Jessica works. He and some other Scouts spend time in the pediatric ward playing games, reading to kids, and so on. He's finished all of his mandatory merit badges and has just his electives to complete once the service project is done."

"That's a great achievement. He's flying, too, right?"

"Yes. He'll have his pilot's license as soon as he turns seventeen and is going to try to have his multi-engine certification before he goes to the Academy."

"How is drama?"

"Non-stop drama!" I declared, causing Uncle Kent and Aunt Jennie to laugh.

"Seriously, it's going great, except I lost my main co-star."

"What happened?" Uncle Kent asked.

"Some personal issues which prevent her from participating," I replied.
"Fortunately, there are others who can step up."

"Jen, we should go to one of Matt's plays," Kent said. "Matt, when is *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

"March 6th through the 8th. If you let me know which days, I can reserve tickets for you. We usually sell out our Friday and Saturday shows, but we can reserve tickets for relatives."

"We'll check the calendar after dinner," Aunt Jennie said. "But probably Saturday will work best."

"Cool! I'm sure Mom will let you use the guest room."

We finished dinner, helped with dishes, then Chelsea and I headed to Uncle Jake's house.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

"If I get beat by a girl again..." Jesse said, looking directly at Lieutenant Nomura.

"What? You'll shrivel up to nothingness?" she asked with a smirk.

"He's yanking your chain, Lieutenant!" Karl declared. "Trying to put you on tilt!"

"Seriously?" Jesse asked. "No 'bro code' here?"

"Jesse," I said, "if you use the catchphrase, I believe they'll call it justifiable homicide!"

"You got THAT right!" Aaron declared.

"Now that the posturing is out of the way, can we play some cards?" Terry asked.

"You could just give me your chips now," Jesse declared. "It'll save time, effort, and pain!"

"Not a chance!" Terry exclaimed.

"Shuffle up and deal!" I announced.

As occasionally happened, I had a run of bad cards, and my chips were slowly siphoned off by blinds and some speculative bets, none of which paid off, and though I survived the first table breaking up, I didn't make it much longer, losing my last few chips to Dave.

"Somebody mark this day down!" Dave declared. "I knocked Steve out of the tournament and out of the money!"

"Yeah, yeah," I chuckled.

I took the opportunity to spend some time with the men who didn't usually play poker -- Al, John, Miles, and Joel.

 Birgit

"Do you have the details for Saint Martin?" Hannah asked. "My mom wants to know what time the flights are."

"It's Samantha's plane," I replied. "So it's whatever we want! We'll leave sometime in the morning on March 16th and return in the evening on March 22nd. I did ask Samantha for the phone number at the house there, and I'll give it to you. I don't know if our mobile phones will work there or not. I seriously doubt it, so we can't count on that."

"OK. Mom's just a bit nervous."

"She's not going to change her mind, is she?"

"No. But it's the first time I'll be away from home for more than one night. My dad is actually cool with it because it's basically all girls; well, Bob and Javon, but your dad made it clear about the sleeping arrangements!"

"Uh-huh," I smirked. "Like you're going to follow THOSE!"

"So far as my dad knows, I am! Bob is sleeping with you, right?"

"Yes."

"What else is there to do besides the beach?"

"There are tons of cool cafés, but unfortunately, you have to be eighteen to get into most of the clubs. That said, it's legal for us to drink, though I don't think we should, except maybe wine with dinner. But we can all work on our tans, that's for sure!"

"I need to get a new bathing suit! But one my parents don't know about!"

"Let's go shopping next weekend! I'm sure Tiff and Naomi want to get new suits, too!"

"String bikinis!" Hannah exclaimed.

"It better be strong material for you! You have such awesome boobs!"

"And every single idiot boy at school only sees them! Ugh!"

"You have to admit they're impressive, given you're only fifteen!"

"You don't have anything to be embarrassed about! I bet yours will be like your mom's."

"I hope so!"

"What are you two plotting?" Tiffany asked, coming over to us.

"World domination, of course!" I declared.

"The Saint Martin trip," Hannah said. "I want to get a string bikini! Birgit and I are going shopping next Saturday."

"Count me in!" Tiffany declared.

"Me, too!" Naomi chimed in.

That agreed, we went to join the other girls in Libby's basement.

 Albert

"You don't play poker?" William, Cindi's son, asked me.

"No. Dad invited me, but I prefer hanging out with the guys and playing video games. I also want to focus on flying and achieving Eagle Scout."

"You want to go to the Academy and fly jets, right?" Jonathan, Aunt Melanie's son, asked.

"Yes, but I'll fly whatever I can, including trash haulers!"

"Trash haulers?"

"Cargo. Honestly, I want to fly jets off carriers, but those slots are super limited. I'm doing everything I can to be ready, but there is no guarantee. Nicholas is basically guaranteed a commission if he finishes medical school. What do you plan to do?"

"Computers, like my mom and your dad, though I want to program video games."

"Where's Peter tonight?" Andy asked.

"With Julie," I replied. "He'd rather play with her than with us!"

"You mean they..." Eric asked.

"As if THAT was a secret!" Nicky, Peter's little brother, said, rolling his eyes.

"ALL the time! I mean, like ALL the time!"

"He does have time for Scouts," I countered. "And he's earning good grades, so homework, too."

"Yeah, but he blows us off all the time now!" Nicky complained.

And the Friday group, too, at least according to Jesse. I felt his way was better -- just dating casually until college and hanging out with your friends. Of course, I had Jane, but she was in England, and I only saw her once or twice a year. That meant I had plenty of time for the stuff I wanted to do, not to mention I couldn't marry before I graduated from the Academy, no matter what.

"His loss!" Nicholas declared. "Let's put in the next 24 disc!"

XIX. One Red, One Yellow, One Green

January 19, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"What are you doing in Florida?" I asked Dad when we cuddled on Sunday morning.

"It's our annual executive retreat," Dad replied. "All the senior managers get together to work on revising our long-term plan."

"I thought you were programming full-time now."

"Mostly, but I have responsibility for the NIKA «kami», and I still own more than half the company, so I want to be involved in planning. I leave executing the plans to your Aunt Stephanie, Aunt Elyse, Julia, Cindi, and Liz."

"What kind of plans?" I asked.

"New services we might offer, expansion of our current business, our competition, and pretty much anything that has to do with our business. We spend a lot of time talking about how things are changing in the technology industry. When I was your age, barely anyone had a computer, there was no Internet, and nobody had a cellular phone."

"And your pet dinosaur walked to school with you every day?" I teased.

"Since when did you become a young-earth creationist?" Dad asked.

"Oh, please!" exclaimed. "I *know* dinosaurs and people weren't around at the same time! I was teasing you!"

"I know, and I turned the tables!" Dad declared. "What's with you and Kevin Fogerty?"

"We're just visiting each other's dōjō for now. I'd like him to ask me out, but he thinks his parents would freak out that I'm only fourteen. It's so dumb because there is nothing wrong with a Senior dating a Freshman! I can't wait to go to Sweden, where I'll be treated like a young adult!"

"Exactly as you are in our family and with our friends," Dad countered. "But I understand your point. When I was in High School, nobody would have blinked about a Senior dating a Sophomore or a Freshman, and now we have people saying that even Sophomores are too young for Seniors."

"How did things get worse? They should be getting better!" I asked.

"A combination of a reaction to the 1960s and to AIDS created a perfect environment for the prudes to try to reassert control. Add to that the entire 'think of the children' argument, which works so well on voters, and you end up with the situation we're seeing now, and it's only going to get worse."

"That just sucks! Maybe we should move to Sweden?"

"I considered that when I was eighteen, but in the end, I chose to come to Chicago to attend IIT, and now our life is here. That said, you're free to make your life wherever you please. I hope you'll be close, but I want you to be happy."

He could have made me VERY happy on my birthday, and I almost said so but stopped just in time. As annoying as Ashley could be, she was right about me speaking or acting before thinking.

"I know," I sighed.

"What are you doing today?" Dad asked.

"This morning, just chilling, then our Hangout after lunch, and after that, Tomás and I are hanging out."

With Libby, too, but Dad didn't need to know that.

"Breakfast is ready," Yuriko announced from the door to the sunroom.

"We'll be right there," Dad said.

Happily, I got my extra three minutes of cuddles.



Albert

"Do you have a minute, Dad?" I asked after breakfast.

"Sure," Dad agreed. "Let's go to my study."

I followed him to the study, shut the door behind us, and then sat down next to him in the large leather chairs.

"I'm looking into JROTC programs," I said. "The best program in the city is at William Howard Taft High."

"Navy, right?" Dad asked with a smirk.

"Is that a serious question? NJROTC!"

"Obviously," Dad chuckled. "Where is Willam Howard Taft High?"

"6530 West Bryn Mawr Avenue, which is in Norwood Park. I could get there by the L -- Red Line to the Blue Line and then about a mile walk from the station to the school."

"That'll be rough in the snow and cold. Do you know what time classes start?"

"7:45am," I replied.

"OK. Go ahead and put in your application, and let me know what I need to do. We have some time to sort it out, but I think I could drive you to school on cold days, at least until you get your driver's license. I take it you've worked out just how early you'll need to get up and how late you'll get home?"

"Compared to Plebe Summer?" I asked.

Dad laughed, "Never mind! I assume there are fees?"

"Yes. A few hundred dollars plus uniforms and some other costs."

"OK. Get all the details, please. Have you spoken to your mom about this?"

"No. I thought military stuff was your purview. Should I?"

"I don't believe she'll have a problem with it. She's never expressed any concern about you going to the Academy or serving in the Navy. And she's been mellow about your flying. I think you should just let her know that you talked to me

about JROTC, which would mean leaving the Lab School for a public High School. Your mom doesn't have any concerns about public schools in general, just about Kenwood Academy."

"OK. I'll talk to her tonight. You're going to Florida, right?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome."



Jesse

Our Hangout was at the Compound because Libby was attending Dad's Philosophy Club, so we couldn't meet at her house. We had about twenty people, which meant we needed the great room, and I had cleared that with Dad, though he was flying to Florida for business. Birgit and I were setting up when my mobile phone rang.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi! It's Anna! I have my flight information!"

"OK. Let me grab a pen and paper!"

I went to the kitchen and got a pen and some scratch paper.

"Ready," I said.

"I'm flying SAS from Stockholm and my flight arrives in Chicago at 1905 on Friday, February 21st. My return flight is at 1725 on Saturday, March 1st."

"Then you'll be here for my birthday on the 22nd," I said. "There's always a family party, and I'm pretty sure my friends are planning something, too."

"You'll be seventeen, right?"

"Yes. When's your birthday?"

"April 18th. Anyway, I don't want to run up my parents' phone bill, so I'll see you in a month!"

"I'm looking forward to it!"

"Me, too!"

We said goodbye, and I closed my phone. I updated the calendar in the kitchen with the days she'd be in Chicago, then went to the main house, put the flight information on the calendar, and marked it with a green star, which meant I needed a car.

"What's up?" Birgit asked.

"Anna is coming to visit during «sportlov»," I said.

"Cool! You do like your tall blondes! And short ones, too! But Larisa might grow more, 'cause she's only fourteen. Speaking of Larisa, are you going to see her this year?"

"She and General Dmitry will fly here to see the semi-final and final game."

"One more, right?"

"In the group stage. We're already guaranteed the semis, which are February 1st. The final is February 2nd. The following weekend are the regionals, and if we win both games, we go to State."

"What do you think?"

"I think we have to bust our butts and play top hockey. My goal is the citywide championship, and going to State would be a bonus. Did you sort out your situation with Bob and Tomás?"

"Status quo," I replied. "I'll see what happens in Saint Martin and figure it out. What are you going to do about Zahra?"

"There isn't much I can do."

"Well, if you ever wonder why I have zero use for religion, that's a perfect example!"

"And you're entitled to our opinion!" I said. "Let's finish setting up. People will start arriving in a few minutes."

"OK."

[Boca Raton, Florida]

 Steve

There were limited flights without people having to stay an extra night, so Stephanie, Liz, and I flew to Florida together.

"Good afternoon, Greg," I said when he opened the door at the Spurgeon house.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Adams. Your group is the first to arrive. I'll take your bags."

"Thank you."

"Ms. Brennan has you in the master bedroom, Mr. Adams. She said to let you know she'll be here later. Ms. Adams and Mrs. Crane, Ms. Brennan has you in the rooms on either side of the master bedroom. I'll take your bags to your rooms. Kenton is expecting you in the great room."

"Thanks again, Greg."

We set our bags down and went to the great room, where Kenton greeted us, asked us our drink preferences, and made them for us.

"How the heck did we end up with a temp in the mid-50s?" Stephanie grouched. "It's supposed to be in the 70s!"

"Don't look at me!" I exclaimed. "Blame the landlord!"

"Samantha may have more money than God, but even she can't control the weather!" Liz declared mirthfully.

"The forecast said it won't be above 65°F the entire time we're here," I said. "Bathing suits are wasted, and we won't spend nearly as much time outside as we have in past years."

In the next hour, Mario, John, Barbara, Zeke, Tasha, Julia, Dave, Cyndi, Elyse, Brenda, and Kimmy arrived. The last to arrive were Bob, Eve, Larry, and Melinda.

"Welcome!" Rebekah Brennan called out when she walked into the great room just before 6:00pm. "Dinner is served in the dining room!"

Kara's cousin was nearly as beautiful as Kara, and she, like Kara, could have passed for thirty rather than looking thirty-seven. Our meal was served by Samantha's staff, and once we'd eaten, Stephanie stood up.

"Welcome, everyone, to our annual Executive Retreat!" she said. "I hope everyone is satisfied with their rooms. If you have any concerns, Rebekah will address them, and, of course, there is staff on-call at any time, day or night. You all have copies of the schedule, so you know our first session tomorrow is our financial review, conducted by Elyse. Following that is an update on employment law by Bob and Liz.

"Tomorrow afternoon, we'll have our strategic review, with presentations by Julia, Tasha, Melinda, and Larry. Our final session, on Tuesday morning and early afternoon, is strategic planning. Tomorrow evening, after dinner, you have a choice of a jazz club or a comedy club. Please let Kenton know which you prefer if you haven't already done so.

"That's it for now! Enjoy the dessert and the open bar after dinner! I'm sorry about the cool temperatures, though the hot tub is warmed up. Unfortunately for my brother, Samantha's dad didn't see fit to install a sauna when he built this house! For those who want to exercise tomorrow and Tuesday, there are a pair of treadmills, two resistance machines, and free weights in the gym. Have a good evening!"

We had a great evening catching up with the people who weren't based in Chicago, and just after 10:00pm, I said 'good night' and headed up to the master bedroom. The bed had been turned down as usual, and there was a pot of lemon

tea waiting for me on a tea warmer. On the tray with the tea was a white envelope with my name on it. I opened it and read the enclosed note.

I hope you like the furniture.

--Samantha

I looked around the room, and to my unpracticed eye to anything beyond Scandinavian Modern, it all looked the same, or similar to me, though the comforter on the bed was black rather than navy blue. I poured myself some tea, then called home to speak to my wives and daughters, then took out my laptop to check my personal email and Usenet. About five minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I called out.

The door opened, and a pretty redhead, who looked to be about twenty, stepped into the room.

"Hi," she said brightly. "I'm Shir! Do you need anything to go with your tea?"

"No, thank you."

"You can reach me anytime by dialing #20 on the phone."

"Thanks. Can I ask a question?"

"What?"

"What changed about the furniture?"

Shirl laughed, stepped into the hallway, and came back with a small tray and handed it to me. As soon as I lifted the napkin, I started laughing, realizing

exactly what I'd missed -- a very subtle but now obvious allusion by Samantha. On the tray were a red, a yellow, and a green cracker.

"I'll pass on the green ones," I chuckled. "What's your real name?"

"Cheryl, so it's actually pretty close to 'Shirl'."

"Your idea? Or Samantha's?"

"I had NO clue until she told me about it. I had never seen the movie."

"I hope you watched it, given the implications."

Cheryl laughed, "I did, and asked Samantha if it was part of the job requirement!"

"She'd never make that a requirement nor even ask."

"Of course not!" Cheryl agreed. "She simply suggested you'd appreciate the references and that you would be cool with it just being a joke."

"She's right."

"She thought you'd figure it out as soon as I gave my pseudonym."

"I should have, but it didn't click for some reason. Obviously, the crackers in the three *Soylent* colors made it obvious!"

"Well, if, like Detective Thorn, you're interested in the 'furniture', I'm positive you'll find the furniture soft, warm, and comfortable! Samantha said you had a thing for redheads."

"Samantha is not wrong!" I chuckled. "College student?"

"Freshman pre-med at Florida Atlantic."

"Therefore, a serious student," I observed.

"And also an Irish Catholic girl away from home for the first time, so not *too* serious."

"Let me guess, all-girls Catholic High School."

"Right the first time! And I'm aware of your rule and can provide the necessary credentials if you're interested. If so, I need to grab the portable phone."

She was, unsurprisingly, a perfect 'Steve type' girl and fit the rules I'd agreed with Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne. Cheryl's red hair and green eyes sealed the deal.

"I'd be happy to have some company," I replied.

Cheryl smiled, left the room, and I shut down my computer. She was back in five minutes, with a folded sheet of paper and the portable telephone, and wearing a dress reminiscent of the one Leigh Taylor-Young had worn in *Soylent Green*.

"Nice touch," I chuckled.

She handed me the paper, which was, as I was sure it would be, a clean STI test.

"Samantha suggested you could take me on an unparalleled sexual odyssey," Cheryl said. "For the next two nights, I'd like you to do that!"

She smiled and pushed the dress from her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the hardwood floor. I nodded my approval of the naked girl in front of me, with small breasts, a toned stomach, and sporting bright red pubic hair.

"Very nice," I said as I began undressing. "Very, very nice!"

When I was naked, Cheryl stepped close.

"I'm here to please you and be pleased," she said.

I pulled her into my arms, and we exchanged a soft French kiss.

 Albert

"I talked to dad earlier about enrolling in the NJROTC program at William Howard Taft High. It's the best Navy program in the city. Only Aurora East comes close, but I'd need to live with Aunt Elyse to attend there."

"What did Dad say?" Mom asked.

"To fill out the application and let him know. The school is on the North Side, so he suggested he'd be able to drive me to school in the mornings until I get my driver's license. I could also take the L when it's warm enough, but there's a one-mile walk at the other end which makes it tough in the cold and with snow."

"I have no objections, I know it's what you want to do. Our objections to Kenwood Academy were about the gang activity, not about public schools in general."

"That's what Dad said. I'll fill out the application and keep you posted."

"Thanks."



January 20, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"How are you surviving without cuddle time?" Suzanne teased on Monday morning.

"I offered to go with Dad and cuddle him in Florida!" I declared.

"Uh-huh. Cuddle."

"As far as YOU know!" I giggled.

"How is Photography Club going?"

"I'm enjoying it. On Wednesday, I'm taking a collage of Christmas pictures, which should generate some interesting questions!"

"Everyone there knows about Albert and your sisters, right?"

"Yes, and four kids isn't too strange, especially with two different moms. Seven kids with four moms sure is!"

"True," Suzanne agreed.

"I'm just going to say it's our extended family and hope nobody asks any questions. Bob knows, obviously."

"How are things with him?"

"He agreed to go to Saint Martin with me, so what do you think?"

Suzanne laughed, "I think he's a fifteen-year-old boy, that's what I think! You solved your problem with him?"

"After a fashion," I replied.

"And the boy who was at the dōjō? Kevin?"

"Is hung up on me being fourteen because he thinks his parents will freak out, so we're just visiting each other's dōjō now. I'm hoping he can ask me out after my birthday."

"I assume he's going to college?"

"Yes. He's going to study economics and business at UofC."

"And Tomás?"

"Isn't going to do *anything* to mess up the sexual nirvana in which he finds himself!" I giggled.

Suzanne laughed, and a few seconds later, Yuriko let us know breakfast was ready.

[Boca Raton, Florida]

 Steve

I woke to my alarm at 6:00am after only three hours of sleep and carefully slipped out of bed so as not to disturb Cheryl. I took a quick shower so I didn't smell like sex, put on my running clothes, and headed to the basement gym. I stretched, set the treadmill to a moderate speed, and began my morning run.

"Have fun last night?" Elyse smirked as she came into the gym about five minutes later and got onto the second treadmill.

"I certainly liked the new furniture."

"New furniture?"

I chuckled, "You saw *Soylent Green*, right?"

"About thirty years ago on TV! What about it?"

"The rich, who lived in exclusive secure communities, had concubines who either belonged to them or came with the rented apartment. They were euphemistically called 'furniture'. Samantha decided to have some fun with that reference."

"Wait! She made it part of the employment contract?"

"As if I'd *ever* go along with that!" I countered. "Samantha simply suggested it to the red-haired, green-eyed college Freshman who was free to make her own choice. Samantha left me a cryptic note which said she hoped I enjoyed the furniture. I didn't get the subtle reference and didn't see anything different in the room. Cheryl came in and introduced herself as 'Shirl', the name of the girl in *Soylent Green*, and I still didn't get it. Then she offered three crackers -- one red, one yellow, and one green."

"YOU missed a 'Darmok' reference?! Wow!"

"Yeah, yeah," I chuckled. "Anyway, Samantha had prepped Cheryl by saying that if she, that is, Cheryl, wanted, I'd take her on an unparalleled sexual odyssey. She offered, and I accepted."

"Red-haired, green-eyed 'Steve type'? As if there was any question! Well, one..."

I chuckled, "Hirsute!"

"Steve Adams died and went to heaven, of course!"

"I did very much enjoy the red pubic hair! You know I'm a sucker for that!"

"Obviously! And?"

"I don't kiss and tell!" I declared.

"I need access to your journals!"

"Those are off-limits to everyone! You'll have to wait for the novelization!"

"As if THAT could ever be published!"

She was right, given the sheer quantity of explicit sex, including the previous night, which had been extremely pleasurable -- Cheryl's first time 'around the world', and three more rounds of wonderful sex with her on top, me on top, and once in the 'adultering' position.

"Maybe someday," I said.

I completed my run, then headed back upstairs for a more thorough shower. Cheryl joined me, and I received a fantastic shower blowjob, after which she kissed me without swallowing.

"OK if I come back tonight?" she asked.

"Absolutely!"

We finished our shower, dried off, and dressed. Cheryl had no classes due to MLK Day, so she headed home to get some sleep, knowing we'd be up until the wee hours of the morning when she returned for her overnight shift. I headed to the kitchen for breakfast, which was not a communal meal and was cooked to order.

"Morning," Rebekah said when she came into the kitchen while I was waiting for my bacon and eggs.

"Morning."

"Did you like the new furniture?"

"I'd give it very positive reviews!" I replied.

"It's too bad you're married to my cousin!" she declared. "And yes, I know the situation, but it would be too weird."

"And that's a good reason not to," I replied. "No steady boyfriend?"

"No. I'm dating a retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel who lost his wife to a drunk driver about five years ago, but it's casual."

"Did Kara or one of the others tell you about our friend Jorge?"

"No."

"He was in a car with Jess when they were hit by a drunk driver. Jess barely survived; Jorge didn't."

"That sucks. If you have a few minutes, I wanted to check with you about any special arrangements for the house in Saint Martin. I already spoke with Alex Saunders and Ashley to get the details of your diet."

"Ashley?"

"Kara suggested that Ashley always makes special desserts for you."

"She does."

"Do you plan to cook, or would you like a chef?"

"You know, that would be nice. Just add it to the tab."

"Right, because Samantha will let you pay for anything other than jet fuel!"

"She will because I'll insist. Just make sure I know the charges so I can negotiate from a position of strength!"

"Asking me to betray my boss? There's a high price for that, and you can't pay because you're married to my cousin!"

I chuckled, "Samantha will understand, and you know she'd never take any adverse action for something you did for me."

"True. Anyway, I'll make sure the house is stocked per the information I gathered and make sure the chef is hired. The wine cellar is fully stocked, and there's an ample supply of good whisky -- Tennessee, Irish, Scotch, and Japanese. The

housekeeping staff will be available for you to call if you need them, but otherwise, they'll give you privacy."

"Thanks. Much appreciated."

"Any time! I doubt I'll be in Saint Martin while you're there, but I plan to be in Chicago next month to see Kara."

"Cool."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Ashley

On Monday, because we didn't have school, Susie, Ellie, Jasmine, Veronica, Chadrima, Amber, and a new girl, Nichelle, all came to the house to hang out and bake cookies.

"Your name is the same as the actress who played Uhura, right?" Jasmine asked Nichelle.

"Yes. My dad was a HUGE fan of *Star Trek* and was very happy to see a black woman in a lead role, so he named me after her. Her real name was Grace Dell Nichols, but she didn't like it, so she asked for a new one. They made up 'Nichelle' from 'Nike', the Greek goddess."

"So, like my dad's company," I said. "NIKA."

"I suppose so," Nichelle agreed. "We were born in the same town -- Robbins and my dad went to the same High School she did - Englewood High. And did you know that she thought about leaving the show, but Martin Luther King Junior convinced her to stay?"

"I had no idea! And today is the day we honor him."

"My dad says Doctor King would insist everyone be in school, not have the day off. Did you know that NASA astronaut Mae Jemison said she became an astronaut because of Uhura?"

"That's totally cool!" I declared. "Now, if we could just get some of the cool stuff they had, especially those tablet computers!"

"We already have communicators like in the original series," Chadrima said. "Your phone flips open and can speak to anyone!"

"How about one of those beam transporters?" Jasmine suggested. "Being able to go anywhere basically instantly?"

"I'd settle for limitless energy from antimatter and replicators!" I declared. "Though, like Riker, I'd want to cook for myself because I enjoy it."

"Ugh!" Susie declared. "No way! Replicators and no dishes to do! Yes, please!"

"Now, if I could just get an android to do my chores!" Amber declared.

"One programmed for multiple techniques and a broad variety of pleasuring," I smirked.

"Yes, please!" Amber declared.

"GROSS!" Susie, Ellie, and Veronica all exclaimed.

"Sex with a robot?!" Ellie asked. "Yuck!"

"Sex with ANYONE! Yuck!" Veronica declared.

"I think you'll change your mind in the next two years," Amber declared. "Did you get your period yet?"

"No. And who wants it? Seriously, having to wear pads or whatever? Ugh! And bras? Double ugh!"

I was positive she'd change her mind. Veronica and Ellie were the only ones who hadn't got their periods yet. Mine had started just before Christmas, and it was totally no big deal. I just used pads I got from the hall closet and didn't bother to say anything to anyone except Mom so she could schedule a gynecology appointment for me. Nobody else knew because I wasn't moody like Birgit or crabby like Stephie.

"It's no big deal," I said.

"Ash, are you holding out on us?" Jasmine asked.

I shrugged, "It's seriously not a big deal!"

"SO typical of you, Ashley!" Chadrima declared. "Does anything faze you?"

"Nope!" I declared with a silly smile.

 Birgit

"Thanks for coming over," I said to Lilibeth when we sat down in the Indian room to eat lunch because my sister was in the kitchen with her friends.

"We're BFFs! You know you can call me anytime. You kind of changed after we were together."

"I know, and it's my own dumb fault. I kind of went 'boy crazy'."

"I thought you were happy!" Lilibeth replied.

"Dad and Katy always told me there was a difference between what you wanted to do and what you should do. I made a real mess of things with Philip and Bob and, to some extent, with Peter. And I almost messed up with Bob and Tomás."

"Well, you know MY answer to drama with boys! Avoid doing that with them!"

"You've never had any drama with any girls? Or any problems? I mean, besides your parents."

"Not really, and my parents just don't know because, for them, it's normal for me to hang out with girls and be close friends with girls. I had two girlfriends before I moved to Chicago, and the second one was the serious one. I still talk to her regularly, and I think we'll get back together when I go to BC after I graduate from High School."

"Two and a half years, right?"

"Yes. She's my age, and we're going to BC together. You're going to UofC, right?"

"Yes, because my mom teaches there, so I have a serious discount on tuition."

"Going back to your drama, things must be halfway OK if Bob is going to Saint Martin with you."

"I think so, but I'm actually not sure. I'm sure we'll talk while we're there, but I'm concerned that will mess things up with Tomás."

"I don't know if anyone has said this, but why don't you find a boyfriend? Philip was nice enough, for a guy, anyway."

"I was really dumb," I admitted. "I let my body control my mind and didn't think about what I was doing."

"But you don't regret having sex, right?"

"No way! Both guys in Sweden were awesome. It was when I came home that I caused my own drama."

"You could have just stuck with me!" Lilibeth teased.

"I liked it," I said, "but you're missing the one anatomical feature that makes it SO worth it!"

"Can I ask you a serious question about that?"

"Sure."

"How is it different from a tongue?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it, and it's not as if you're going to experiment to find out!"

"Never!" Lilibeth declared.

"As I said!" I replied with a smile. "It feels full, and I like how it massages my insides. You could try a vibrator, but I don't think you're interested in that, either."

"It just seems so weird to stick something into your body."

"Tongues?" I asked with a smirk.

"Is that an offer?" Lilibeth asked with a sly smile.

"Maybe. Would you answer?"

"Tongues barely go in, and mostly just on the clit, which is what makes us have orgasms. You really like having a dick inside you?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "But seriously, everyone is different and likes different stuff. That's why I reject labels -- they're used to try to put every single person in a limited set of boxes when there are infinite possibilities."

"That's why I like you so much. You don't try to define people; you just let them be who they are. I guess your whole family is like that."

"Yes. It's one of the most important precepts of my dad's philosophy. And that's why so many people like him -- they can be themselves and not worry that he'll think they're weird or wrong or whatever."

"But aren't some things wrong?"

"Hurting someone or violating their rights, but otherwise? What business is it of mine if you want to have sex with girls or two guys want to have sex, or someone wants to smoke pot? None of those things hurt anyone else, so long as they're consensual. It's super important to be open-minded and consider all possibilities. And you know I've experimented!"

"Successfully!" Lilibeth declared.

"With both boys AND girls!" I declared. "And you know my preference."

"Obviously, because you make no secret about it! But if you're interested in another experiment..."

"Let's finish our lunches, OK?"

"OK."

[Boca Raton, Florida]

 Steve

"Do you have a minute for a private talk," Barbara asked when we'd finished lunch.

"Sure," I agreed.

We left the dining room, went to the library, and shut the door.

"What's up?"

"I'd like to work on a transition plan."

"How long?" I asked.

"Almost three years -- the end of 2005."

"What's your next adventure?"

"My husband and I are negotiating! The kids will be in college, we have more than enough in savings and investments, and I'll sell my shares back to you per the ESOP."

"Any hints?"

"The leading thought is to open a bed-and-breakfast in Colorado and to run a web design business."

"Thanks for giving me plenty of advance warning. I suspected this would happen around the time your kids finished college, but I'm not at all surprised you found a way to do it sooner."

"Thanks to you! And you know Tom has been successful as a business consultant, so we're in very good shape."

"When do you want to announce this?"

"Probably mid-2005. That gives you plenty of time to decide who will fill the spot and then plenty of time to complete the transition before I leave."

"Stephanie will have the final say," I replied.

"And yet, there is no way she'd fill a C-level or Regional Vice President slot without your full agreement and participation. In the end, as keeper of the NIKA «kami», it has to be your call."

"I am open to suggestions when the time comes. When is it OK to tell my sister?"

"I'll leave that to you."

"OK"

"Have you given any thought to what you're going to do?" Barbara asked.

"A bit," I replied. "For your ears only."

"Of course."

"I figure age sixty is about right, or maybe sixty-two so that I have forty years. I'll step back, take a seat on the Board, and begin Act III."

"You should have a pile of grandkids by then!" Barbara declared.

"I suspect so," I agreed, imagining that future. "I don't know how I can ever thank you enough for your contribution."

"Or me for your support and trust."

We exchanged a quick, chaste hug, then rejoined the others for the afternoon session.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"I like the fact we had almost all day to be together!" Simone declared late on Monday afternoon.

"I enjoyed it as well! I was surprised when you wanted to play video games after lunch!"

Simone laughed, "I figured four times before lunch would tide us over until now, and that let us do something other than screw."

"True. And I wasn't objecting, just saying I hadn't expected it."

"We have so little time after school, so I have to maximize pleasure!" Simone declared. "Do you think we could use the sauna and whirlpool before I go home?"

"Sure, so long as nobody else is using it. Well, unless you mean just for a sauna and whirlpool."

"Seven total times should be enough, don't you think?"

"Is that a serious question?" I teased, then quickly said, "Yes, of course. Let's rinse off so we don't stink, then go next door."

We showered, dressed, and went next door. I saw the sauna controls were on, but there wasn't a sign, so I opened the door slightly to see Birgit And Lilibeth.

"Any objection to Simone and me joining you?" I asked.

"It's cool with me if it's cool with Lilibeth."

"Sure," Lilibeth agreed.

Simone and I undressed, grabbed towels, and went into the sauna. We sat on the opposite side of the sauna from Birgit and Lilibeth.

"What are you guys doing today?" I asked Birgit.

"Avoiding Suzy Homemaker and her friends baking cookies and pies!"

I laughed, "Ashley does love to do that! You like to do that at Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"Exactly! Twice a year. Miss 'I think, and I know things,' and her friends are baking fanatics!"

"If it keeps them out of trouble, I'd say that's a good thing! Maybe the Girl Gang should consider it!"

"Hardy-har-har," Birgit retorted, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

The door opened, and Natalie stuck her head in.

"Can anyone join this party?"

"The more the merrier," I said. "Birgit?"

"Sure."

Natalie and Yuriko came into the sauna and sat down in the middle, between Birgit and Lilibeth and Simone and me.

"Are my sisters still in the kitchen?" Birgit asked.

"They just finished," Natalie said. "There are enough cookies and pies for an army, but I think each of the girls is taking some home. What are you guys doing?"

"Just hanging out," I said. "Well, Simone with me and Lilibeth with Birgit. We just happened to come to the sauna about the same time."

We sat mostly quietly for about twenty minutes, and when the other four left, I adjusted the controls on the sauna and filled the whirlpool with water. Simone and I got in, with her sitting between my legs and reclining back. Once we were settled, I turned on the water jets.

"Are you worried about the gangs at school?" Simone asked.

"Not really. I know the basketball team is basically all gang members, but they've never ever bothered the hockey team. Why?"

"The Vice Lords and Gangster Disciples are pressuring black girls on the soccer team and softball team to affiliate, and the Latin Kings are trying to make inroads into the school with the Hispanic girls."

"Wonderful," I replied. "Are they after you?"

"I was invited to a party, but I said my parents wouldn't let me go. I'm sure they'll try again. They invited Ebele, but she's not allowed to go to parties or dates. I know a chick from the girls' basketball team talked to Luna, but Luna told her to get lost."

"She's graduating in June and going to Arizona State," I said. "But this sucks big time. I knew the gangs were dealing drugs, but they mostly stayed away from athletes except the basketball team. I'm going talk to the hockey team and find out if anyone is trying to pressure them."

"Basically, every white guy in the school is either on the hockey team or the baseball team," Simone observed. "And most of the white girls are either on the soccer team or are cheerleaders. There are no white gangs at the school."

"The Mafia and the Irish gangs were all pretty much wiped out by each other or the FBI," I observed. "There used to be 'Greaser' gangs in Humbolt Park, but they mostly lost all their power to the Latino and African-American gangs. And we've never really had any Asian gangs here. Have you said anything to anyone in the administration at school?"

"No way! If anyone ever found out, I'd be called a snitch, and you know what they do to snitches."

"You're right. I'll talk to some of the guys privately tomorrow at school and find out if they've been targeted or know anyone who has."

If that happened, it was going to create huge problems for the team, and that was the last thing I needed with only sixteen months to go in High School. I'd managed to avoid any real trouble at school and wanted to keep it that way until I graduated.

Simone and I sat in the whirlpool for about fifteen minutes, then got out of the tub. We put on robes, and to avoid any problems like the ones I'd had with Ebele, we showered and dressed in the main house before we went back to the coach house.

XX. An Exit Plan

January 20, 2003, Boca Raton, Florida

 Steve

"Barbara let me know she's targeting the end of 2005 to retire," I said to Stephanie when we had some time alone together after dinner on Monday.

"I suppose I'm not surprised," Stephanie replied. "That gives us plenty of time, too. Any thoughts?"

"Not at the moment. I requested Barbara recommend someone in mid-2005. I'm inclined to go with her choice, though I retain my right to veto anyone at the VP or C level."

"Of course. We are seeing a bit more turnover than we have in the past, but that's a function of our size."

"True. We're a corporation, not a family. That's one reason I'm happy to stay in my office and code with Penny the way we did when we first started out."

"But with far less input and output!" Stephanie teased.

"ZERO input and output!" I countered. "Much to Penny's chagrin!"

"Did you enjoy the 'furniture'?" Stephanie asked with a smirk.

"Stylish, well-constructed, functional, and soft! Did you know in advance?"

"Samantha asked to make sure your agreement with your wives hadn't changed. I assume you got the reference right away?"

"If only!" I said, shaking my head. "I didn't get it when she introduced herself as 'Shirl'. She had to show me the tray with the colored crackers."

"You're slipping, Big Brother! It must suck to get old!"

"Says the woman who is only four years younger!"

"What-ever!" Stephanie declared with a smirk, imitating Birgit. "What's your take on the meeting so far?"

"I think we're all on the same page, though with different nuances. The conversations have been productive, and I believe we're on the right path."

"You've been awfully quiet."

"My role is protector of the «kami». Nobody suggested anything that goes against our basic principles, so there isn't much to say."

"I was surprised you had nothing to say about Melinda suggesting moving VLC from Baltimore to Northern Virginia."

I shrugged, "It's an operational question, and I trust you, Melinda, and Elyse to handle it. Not to mention, I personally wouldn't live in Baltimore for all of Samantha's money! Of course, if I had her money, I could live anywhere within helicopter commuting distance!"

Stephanie laughed, "I hear you! Where would you actually want to live if it wasn't in Chicago?"

"Sweden, if I was going overseas; Pittsburgh, domestically. Japan would be awesome, but even my great-great-grandkids would be 'outsiders' there."

"Not Russia?"

"Far too volatile," I replied. "I know Russian history well enough, and I've had enough talks with my Russian friends and Natalie to take that risk. Give it another twenty-five years to settle, and with a few peaceful transfers of power between different political parties, I might change my mind. That's against the odds, though, as Putin reminds me of the Tsars, and that would be par for the course for Russia."

"Speaking of that, I assume you read the financial report and saw the substantial increase in licensing fees from Lyudmila's firm?"

"I did," I replied. "She's going gangbusters! What did you decide about her inquiry about basing support staff in Singapore?"

"That's a good idea," Stephanie said. "It gives us the ability to offer round-the-clock support via our cross-support agreements. With Chicago, Moscow, and Singapore, we also have the opportunity to avoid having staff work on public holidays, which is crucial for our managed services offering. Larry was ecstatic."

"She has access to official channels that I could only dream of," I observed. "Her struggle is the source of her capital. Russian oligarchs are a nasty bunch, but Vanya has done a good job guiding her to the least bad ones."

"And neither you nor Samantha can take that risk."

"No, we can't. Nobody knows what's going to happen there, and neither Samantha's clients nor my wives would tolerate that kind of risk."

"You mean because of SKJ?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to the jazz club?"

"No. I'm just going to hang out here."

"And relax on the furniture?" Stephanie asked with a smirk.

"Perhaps."



January 21, 2003, Boca Raton, Florida

 Steve

"Samantha was right," Shirl said as we got out of bed on Tuesday morning. "It was absolutely an unparalleled sexual odyssey!"

"I very much enjoyed it as well," I said as we moved to the bathroom for a shower.

"I need to find someone like you here in Florida!" Shirl declared. "My one High School encounter and my two college encounters didn't even come close!"

"Prom?"

"Yes, but I couldn't stay out all night. I think the best thing to say about it is that it was something I wanted to do, but it was only OK. My two college encounters were better, but the guy turned out to be a self-centered jerk."

"I've been accused of that in the past," I said as we moved under the spray.

"It's certainly not true now! You wouldn't happen to know anyone in their thirties in this area, would you?"

"Unfortunately, no, but I'm positive if you ask Rebekah, she'll know someone."

"How often do you come to Florida?"

"Once a year," I replied.

"Does your freedom extend far enough to see you again next January?"

"Assuming you don't have a boyfriend, it should be OK."

Shirl kissed me, lowered herself to her knees, then looked up.

"A special thank you!" she said, then took my glans into her mouth.

When she finished, we shared a fierce French kiss. I turned her so her back was to me and tweaked her nipple, and fingered her clit to bring her off. After her orgasm, we washed each other, and then, after a wink, she lowered herself to give me another fantastic blowjob.

When she finished, we exchanged another fierce French kiss, then got out of the shower. We dried ourselves, dressed, and then headed downstairs for breakfast. Shirl grabbed a blueberry muffin, then I walked her out to her car because she had an 8:00am class. After a hug and a kiss, she got into her Ford Escort and drove away. Once her car was out of sight, I headed back inside to join the rest of the NIKA team.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"Got a sec for a private talk?" I asked DeShawn and Tomás after practice on Tuesday morning.

They did, and we went to the game room at the rink because nobody was playing video games.

"What's up?" Deshawn asked.

"Have either of you guys been approached by gang members?"

Deshawn looked down, and that telegraphed what he was going to say.

"Trey said that Gangster Disciples want me and I'd join if I knew what was good for me and my little sister."

"Shit," I replied. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. He said it, stared me in the eyes, then walked away."

"A Latin King talked to me last week," Tomás said. "I know he talked to Marco, too."

"What are you guys going to do?" I asked.

"I asked my mom about Chicago Latin," Tomás said.

"And I asked my dad about Wolcott College Prep," Deshawn said.

"That is going to fuck over the team badly," I groused. "We need to find something to do about it."

"What?" Deshawn asked. "Your brothers and sisters all moved to the Lab School because of gangs and drugs."

"I don't know," I said. "But if you guys leave, we're basically screwed. Nobody who tried out was even close. And Marco was miles better than any other Freshman except Nicholas. I think I'll talk to my dad when he gets home tonight."

"Nothing personal," Deshawn said, "but what's a white guy going to do against black and Hispanic gangs?"

"No clue, but I have to talk to him."

The three of us left the game room, I found Nicholas, and drove us home.

 Steve

"I think we have a problem at Kenwood Academy," Jesse said when he came to see me on Tuesday afternoon.

"What's that?"

"The gangs are trying to recruit Deshawn, Tomás, and Marco, and they basically threatened Deshawn's family. One of the girls told me they're targeting athletes besides the basketball team, including the girls. The guys told me they're thinking about alternative schools. I'm afraid their parents are going to decide, like Aunt Kara and Aunt Jess, to move them to another school, probably a private one."

"Has anyone threatened you or talked to you?"

"No, but I'm afraid it's going to wreck the hockey team. And you know the trouble we already have because black and Hispanic kids are more interested in football, baseball, or basketball than in hockey. Simone pointed out that basically every white guy is either on the hockey team or baseball team, and the white girls are on the soccer team or are cheerleaders. If the gangs infiltrate the sports teams, it's going to cause serious problems. You know a bunch of the kids moved to the Lab School or parochial schools."

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I mean, it's not like we can take on the gangs, and I'm not sure I can convince the guys to hold the line against them, given they threaten violence. Can you imagine what would happen if the black and Hispanic guys on the team are split between the Vice Lords, Gangster Disciples, Blackstone Rangers, and Latin Kings? And I'm afraid that Morgan Park is going to pull out of the deal."

"Do you think that's a real possibility?"

"I do. Pete's parents expressed concerns, but Coach was able to truthfully tell them that nobody on the team was affiliated. Even if the guys manage to hold the line, the gangs are going to try intimidation, especially if someone like me or anyone from Morgan Park interferes in any way."

"It sounds to me like you believe it's a lost cause."

"It sucks, and I don't want to abandon the team, but I'm not sure there's a good solution. I know it's tough to get into the private schools, and it might even be too late."

"If you choose a school that fields its own team, I suspect you could simply talk to the coach, and they'd make a spot available for you. You are the best goalkeeper in the city. Just out of curiosity, which team in the playoffs just needs a new keeper to be citywide champions?"

I chuckled, "Saint Rita, but I wouldn't play for them to save my life! That means either Chicago Latin or British International."

"Talk to your moms and decide what you want to do. I'll support your decision whether it's to stay or go."

"Thanks, Dad."



Jesse

"It's up to you, Jesse," Mom One said.

"I know," I replied with a smile. "But I actually want your opinions."

"Let's say I'd strongly prefer you weren't at a school where gangs were having turf wars," Mom Two said. "I won't bring up the drug dealing because I don't think you could find a High School where that didn't happen!"

"Including the Lab School," I replied. "Though that's mostly Adderall and some ecstasy."

"I'm curious how you know about that?"

"Pillow talk with Missy," I smirked.

Mom One rolled her eyes, "You and your dad are like peas in a pod!"

"You know, we never really talked about it, but did either of you use drugs?"

"It was mostly alcohol for me," Mom One said. "I was a borderline alcoholic in High School and my first few years in college. I smoked some pot in High School when I lived in Seattle. Your dad would never have tolerated it while I was close to him."

"No shit," I said. "If there's one thing Dad was clear about, it's that using illegal drugs is a quick way to lose privileges. Doubly so since that time one of Stephanie's friends OD'd. Mom Two?"

"Pot in High School. That was just a thing pretty much everyone did in the 70s."

"I agree with Mom Two on changing schools. What did your dad say?"

"That he'd support my decision. I really hate the idea, but the school has changed a lot in the last three years. And it's totally going to screw the hockey team, but I'd be shocked if Morgan Park maintained their deal with us. They already had concerns about being involved with CPS, and Pete mentioned his dad's discomfort with Kenwood Academy."

"What are you going to do?" Mom One asked.

"When the playoffs are over, talk to Coach, then call the coaches at Chicago Latin and British International to see if they can get me in because it's late to apply for the Fall. If I can't get into one of those, I'll look further. I know Albert plans to attend William Howard Taft High in the Fall for their NJROTC program if he can get in. He filled out the application, and I think with his grades, his Scouting, and references from three Navy men, he'll easily get in. His fallback is Aurora East, but he'd have to live with Aunt Elyse and Eduardo to attend there."

"Isn't that school on the North side?" Mom Two asked.

"Yes. Albert said he could take the L, but Dad offered to drive him when it's cold or snowing because there's a mile walk at the other end."

"I could probably be the backup," Mom Two said. "I can drive to Evanston rather than take the train, and it's not too far out of the way if it's where I think it is. I'll talk to your dad. What about your friends?"

"Almost all the girls are either at the Lab School or Maria, and the cousins are all in parochial schools. Most of the guys are from Morgan Park, except Deshawn and Tomás. The real challenge is for Nicholas, but I think he could go to the Lab School because Aunt Bethany works at the hospital. It's possible for individual players to make their own deals, and there may be some kind of arrangement with the Lab School already. If I could arrange it, I'd do that, but neither of you nor Dad work for the university, so I'm not eligible."

"OK," Mom One said. "Mom Two and I will pay your tuition."

"I leave the 'high finance' discussions to you two and Dad! I have a bit more homework to do before bed, so I'll say 'good night' now and go upstairs."

We all said 'good night', and I went up to my room to finish my math homework.



January 22, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Wednesday morning, while Penny was taking a break, I turned on my noise generator and used my mobile phone to call Katya in New York.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel!" I exclaimed. "How is the Colonel this morning?"

"About to get on a plane and fly to Chicago to shoot an impudent whelp!" she said laughing.

"Me or Jesse?" I asked.

"YES!" Katya exclaimed. "I'm good. How are you, Stephen Rayevich?"

"Good. I have a question for you."

"About Birgit?"

I laughed, "No, she's her own person. If she has anything she needs, she'll call you! And if you have any concerns, I'd expect you to speak to her."

"She's a perfectly behaved young woman when she is here!"

I doubted *that*, but I was positive Birgit treated Katya with appropriate respect.

"I suppose she has to be *somewhere*!" I chuckled. "Nearly twenty years ago, when Vanya Voronin had me vetted, he said they could find no evidence of a 'Ray Adams' admitted to Russia during the Great Patriotic War, and chalked it up to missing records. Do you still have contacts that would let you check one or two other names?"

"I already know the answer to your question, Stepa," Katya said. "I wondered if your father would ever tell you. And before you ask, Vanya does not know. I hope you are not upset with me."

"Well, you just restored my faith in the KGB, such as it was," I said. "What do you know?"

"He was admitted as Lewis B. Hano, a name which he used after your grandmother remarried following her divorce from your grandfather. Your father had spent some time in a children's home because your grandmother was unable to care for him. Once she remarried, she and her new husband brought him to their home, and his surname was changed from Tobias to Hano."

"That matches what my half-brother told me when he showed up at my door on Christmas Eve."

"Ah, so you know that, too. Do you know about your grandmother?"

"That she was a Russian Jew whose parents emigrated to America just before she was born? And that she was pregnant with my dad when she married my grandfather after his first wife died from influenza. I also know my dad married Marion Fitz, and they had children. There was a divorce, and I don't know many details after that, though I do know the woman remarried. My mom does not know about my dad's other family."

"All of that matches what we found. It required quite a bit of legwork in 1984, as you can imagine."

"I can. The FBI seems to have figured it out sometime around 1991, though they may have figured it out before. They asked me about both the Tobias and Hano identities when they were looking for Reds under my bed in 1991!"

Katya laughed softly, "She was *in* your bed! Though it was before your «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) marriage!" ("unconventional")

"True! In any event, I had no idea about the Hano personality, but I did know my dad's birth name and the names of his parents. He left out basically everything from 1917 to 1958. Was he actually in the CIA?"

"Yes, in Cuba, as Lewis B. Hano. That is the name under which his military records appear."

"Is there anything else you can tell me from the KGB investigation?"

"His final assignment in the US Navy was USS *Biddle*, in 1945, just as the Great Patriotic War ended."

"If you're going to say 'Great Patriotic War' for 'World War II', then I'm going to keep addressing you as 'Comrade Colonel!'"

"You are a real smart aleck, Stepa!"

"Yes, I am! And I understand why you kept that information from me. Had I found out earlier, I think I might have reacted less positively."

"I had no permission to share that information with you, something I'm sure you understand. I could not even share it with Ivan Voronin, despite it being he who requested you be vetted."

"Out of curiosity..."

Katya laughed, "You had no lack of female company in High School! Beyond that, I can hardly give away KGB secrets! I promised!"

I laughed, "Right. Sure."

"We knew you had association with the Mafia, but we weren't ever sure if you knew who you were working for because your friend Joyce was never involved."

"I knew," I replied. "But I trust you would never betray my confidence."

"Never!"

"Want to know something I find amusing?"

"What's that?"

"That the FBI never knew, but the KGB did."

"The 'Sword and Shield of the Party' sees all and knows all!" Katya said mirthfully. "But we, too, had our blind spots. That said, I am very happy the Cold War ended and that our nations are discovering how to be friends again."

"Me, too," I replied. "Thanks, Katya."

"You're welcome, Stepa! We hope to see you soon!"

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up just as Penny returned.

"Did you walk all the way to 550 to get your snacks?"

"Duh!" she exclaimed. "And to hang out with someone besides you!"

"You wound me, Pretty Penny!"

"I'd be happy if you penetrated me!" Penny smirked. "Very happy! And you could make Birgit's day!"

"You go ask Liz for permission and let me know," I said.

"You are just no fun!" Penny exclaimed. "No fun at all!"

 Birgit

"Birgit, will you present your collage, please?" Mr. Tavares requested.

I got up and carried my poster board with a collection of photos I'd taken during our Christmas celebration. I knew it might be controversial, but not nearly if I'd included photos of my dad and moms celebrating! I set the poster board on the easel, then turned to face the club members.

"I started with photos of us decorating the tree," I said. "And then photos of the things we do every year - baking cookies and pies, wrapping presents, and having our meals. We actually have multiple Christmas celebrations because of my extended family, and I included two shots, one each by my brother Matthew and my brother Jesse, of their celebrations, plus two different celebrations at our house. The last pictures are from Boxing Day when all the grandparents visit."

"Thank you, Birgit," Mr. Tavares said. "You told a nice story, and your photos capture the spirit of the celebrations without appearing staged. Does anyone have any comments or questions?"

"How many kids are there in your family?" Greg asked.

"Let's keep this about the photos, please," Mr. Tavares said before I could answer. "We're asking people to share private moments with their families, so we need to respect that privacy."

"Er, sorry," Greg said.

"Why did you choose black and white for some photos and color for others?" Kelly asked.

"I thought the baking photos were so 1950s that black and white made sense."

"You could use sepia techniques to make them look old," Mr. Tavares said. "But I don't think baking at Christmas is old-fashioned."

"Most of my friends agree with me; most of the girls in the kitchen pictures are my little sister Ashley's friends. The three older girls are students who live with us. Mr. Tavares, I'd actually like to learn how to make sepia-toned photos."

"I'd like to learn that, too," Bob chimed in.

"And me," Kelly declared.

"OK," Mr. Tavares agreed. "I will make that our February project. Thank you, Birgit. Excellent work. Kelly, you're next, please."

I carried my poster board back to my seat and sat down. When everyone had completed their presentations, Mr. Tavares dismissed the club.

"Very circumspect," Bob said when we left the classroom. "Students living with us?"

"Can you imagine? I mean, sure, you know, and so do some others, but people totally freaked out when my dad had only two wives."

"And now he has three and two live-in girlfriends! A guy can dream!"

I laughed, "As nearly all of our family friends say, good luck with that!"

"Hi, Birgit!" Fangsu exclaimed, coming up to us. "Ready to go?"

"Yes. See you tomorrow at lunch, Bob?"

"Yes!"

We met Zahra and Zaida and left the school for my house, where we could do our homework. Well, three of us because I was positive Zahra would want to be with Jesse.

 Jesse

"Zahra would like you to come to the main house," Birgit said when she came to the coach house after school.

"OK," I said, getting up from my desk.

I followed Birgit to the main house, where Zahra asked me to speak privately. I knew Zaida was supposed to be with her at all times, but I sure as heck wasn't going to say anything to anyone. We went to my dad's study because Suzanne and Yuriko were in the Indian room studying.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I want to keep seeing you, but Wednesdays don't really work because Birgit has Photography Club, which means we only have about thirty minutes based on when I'm expected home."

"I'm afraid it's going to become increasingly difficult," I said. "And we run the risk of your dad finding out, and if that were to happen..."

"I know," Zahra sighed. "I really wish things were different, but I don't think they can be."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't blame you, Jesse," Zahra said. "It's not your fault or my fault, really. It's the teachings of our faith and my parents."

"What would happen if your dad were to find out?"

"Nothing good," Zahra said, tears forming in her eyes. "I love you, Jesse, but..."

I took her into my arms and hugged her,

"I know," I said.

Zahra cried for a few minutes but then released me.

"I should wash my face and go home," she said. "Good luck in your hockey games."

"I hope you'll still come cheer for me."

"Maybe," Zahra said.

I walked her to the powder room so she could blow her nose and wash her face. Once she'd done that, she and Zaida left the house. When they were on the sidewalk, I shut the door and began walking back to the coach house.

"Did you break up?" Birgit asked. "Well, you know what I mean."

"I probably won't see her again unless something major changes, and I don't see that happening."

"Did you think more about the gang problem?"

"Yes. I heard all three black gangs are trying to recruit the most members, so they control the school. And nobody seems to be able to stop them. That means I think I have to look for alternatives. Both Deshawn and Tomás confirmed they asked their parents to transfer. And Pete confirmed that his dad is going to ask the Board at Morgan Park to change their association to another school."

"That's the death knell, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "It sucks. It shouldn't change anything with Tomás, though. Or did you decide you'd rather have Bob?"

"Neither of them are jealous, so right now, status quo. I think that might change after Saint Martin, but I think there's a good chance I can get Kevin to ask me out."

"Kevin?"

"He's at Sensei Sharon's dojo and attends Lane Tech. He's been at our dōjō, and I'm visiting his next month. He is reluctant to go out because he's a Senior, and I'm only fourteen. I think after my birthday he might ask me out. And I have other options, too."

I laughed, "Including Lilibeth?"

"Who told?!" Birgit demanded.

"You did, just now! I figured you had at least experimented."

"More than once," I smirked. "And not just with her!"

"Interesting," I chuckled. "And before you ask, there is ZERO chance I'd experiment that way!"

"Touchy, touchy!" Birgit teased. "I bet you have homework to do; I sure do."

"I do."

I left the main house, walked to the coach house, and went up to my room to work on a paper for my introductory psychology class.



January 23, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

I was surprised to see Bethany at the house when I arrived home from karate on Thursday evening. I was even more surprised she was alone.

"Hi," I said. "What's up?"

"I have a proof copy of the revised chapter of my book," she said.

"And I'm going to confirm your belief I'm an asshole and say I need to see the *entire* book, not just the chapter on sex. Our deal was about the entire book, not just one chapter. I'd judge the fact you're here alone rather than bringing Tom

with you, is because you know he'd agree with my version of our agreement, not yours."

"Asshole!" Bethany growled.

"As I thought," I said. "I need to see the entire book. And you know I'll confirm the final proof copy before a single drop of ink hits paper."

"You don't trust me."

"No, I don't. You haven't actually changed your opinion or your views; you simply acquiesced to my insistence that your book remains sex-positive and not reflect the insanity that has overtaken society, including your profession. Write another book, if you want, maybe *Smart Teens; Stupid Adults* or *Dumb Adults; Dumb Choices*. Or maybe just *Society Has Its Head Up Its Ass -- Here's How You Can Make Things Worse!?*"

"Fuck you!" Bethany exclaimed.

"Which is, as I said, the ultimate source of your problem. You admitted it to me."

"You really are an asshole!"

"And you've turned into a shrew like my mom!"

Bethany recoiled in shock, understanding that was the most vile comparison I could make.

"Your goal," I continued, "is the same -- to ensure your prudish views are imposed on everyone and to declare anyone who disagrees with you to be a pervert or mentally ill. Well, physician heal thyself! I'd suggest counseling, but

pretty much every counselor out there has bought into the mass delusion about young adults being no different from toddlers except in body mass.

"I keep hearing 'brains continue to develop into our early twenties' with attendant implied claims that until your brain stops developing, you're still a child who has to be coddled, monitored, and controlled. Well, I'll put my kids up against any and all comers, including adults, and we'll see who is immature and ignorant and who is mature and intelligent.

"Hell, I'll go one better and put YOUR son against anyone you name, and I bet you dollars to doughnuts he holds his own, if not comes out ahead. Ashely, my youngest is more qualified to be in medical school than at least half the students in my critical thinking seminars. And if we go back to the start of the school year, better than at least three-fourths of them. She's eleven, for Pete's sake! So, go home and come back with the entire proof, not just one chapter."

"Prick."

"If it makes you feel good to call me names, go ahead. You aren't going to change my mind. As the saying goes, 'Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me'. You need to remember that bit of folk wisdom because if you don't, you'll be with the cabal that's forming to censor any speech that is 'offensive'. Of course, George Carlin and Frank Zappa successfully defended it from direct government action, but not from indirect action or worse, mob action."

"And yet, here you are, imposing censorship on ME!" Bethany said angrily.

"Not at all," I replied. "You're free to write a different book with a different publisher. You're free to post whatever you want on the internet. You're free to give any talks you want. The only thing you aren't able to do is modify a sex-positive book for teens and make it into something that demonizes sex. So, no,

I'm not censoring you. Your publisher, who owns the copyright, is electing to keep its current message. You agreed to that when you gave up your interest in the book."

"Because that's the only way!" Bethany protested.

"We've had this argument before, and it's not profitable. I thought we might be past our problems, but we clearly aren't."

"Because you won't see reason!" Bethany declared.

"Oh, for the love of Loki! I'm being reasonable and rational. You're being emotional and irrational. In fact, I suspect you *still* think it's all about me wanting to sleep with teenagers. It's not! In fact, I pretty much left it alone until you decided you had to impose your new, insane views on my kids and the cousins! If you want to insist it's about me and only about me, you'll never, ever understand, and we'll never, ever get past this. Go home, Bethany."

She glared, then left my study. I followed her to the foyer, and once she was gone, I joined my wives in the Indian room.

"I take it that didn't go well," Jessica asked.

"She brought a copy of one revised chapter to get my approval for the whole book to be published. I don't trust her, and I'd say her reaction proves my point."

"You think she was trying to slip it by you?"

"I do. I believe she hoped I'd read the chapter, agree, and tell Samantha to release the hold. I bet you anything in other chapters, she basically said something equivalent to the fact that the chapter on sex was provided for information, and it

shouldn't be considered advice to actually do it except in whatever limited way she decided to describe."

"She needs counseling," Kara observed.

"I agree," I replied. "But who? Her entire profession is somewhere on the same downward slope."

"What about Clara Brown?" Jessica asked. "She seemed to have avoided the insanity so far."

"I'll talk to her when I'm in Rochester next month," I said. "But I can't imagine Bethany would agree to see her because she's convinced she is right the way Tim Saddler and Kent van der Meer are convinced they're right. It's akin to religious fanaticism."

"She sounds like your mom," Kara observed.

"I said that, and it rocked her back, but it didn't change her mind. She's unwilling to consider she might be wrong."

"So, like Jessica, then?" Kara teased.

I couldn't help myself laughing.

"Careful, Tiger!" Jessica faux-threatened.

"Kara, you know the difference between God and a surgeon, right?" I asked with a smirk.

"God doesn't think he's a surgeon!" Kara declared mirthfully.

"You two are hilarious," Jessica deadpanned.

"Deny it, Babe!" I said. "Your dad sure doesn't!"

"What-ever!" Jessica exclaimed.

"So now what?" Suzanne asked.

"For me? Nothing. I wait for her to send me a complete proof copy. And then I verify it's actually the one submitted to the publisher."

"OK to change topics?" Kara asked.

"Sure," I agreed.

"Jennifer and Josie came to talk to me before you came home. It sounds as if they agree with Jess and me."

"They do."

"Jesse must be pretty upset," Suzanne observed.

"At the situation, not at Jennifer and Josie. He brought to issue to me, then to them. We left the decision to him."

"Tiger..." Jessica warned.

"I am NOT taking Birgit's side on the matter, so no need to defend Kara's decision. Yes, I would have handled it differently, but Kara didn't do anything wrong. As I explained to our precocious daughter, sometimes parents make decisions."

"Using 'precocious' doesn't narrow it down!" Jessica said with a smile.

"No kidding," I chuckled. "But in context, it was clear who I was referring to."

We were interrupted by my mobile phone ringing. I pulled it from my pocket and saw a 415 number I didn't recognize, but I had a strong idea as to who was calling.

"OK to take this?" I asked my wives.

"Sure," Kara agreed. So I flipped open the phone.

"Steve Adams."

"Hi, it's Raven. Do you have a moment to talk?"

"I do. Give me a second."

I excused myself and went to my study, closing the door behind me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I need some advice from my mentor," she said.

"About?"

"When is the right time to go to bed with a guy?"

"Is this an actual or hypothetical question?"

"Does it matter?"

"Only from the standpoint of asking questions about the relationship."

"Purely hypothetical. Well, I was asked on a date, so not actually purely, but enough."

"That's a question for which there is no simple, easy, one-size-fits-all answer except to say you do it when you're ready to do it. That could be five minutes, five dates, five months, or five years. It also depends on what you want from the relationship. If it's just fucking, then it's about attraction and how you'll feel about yourself the following day."

"Five minutes? Seriously?"

"If you know you want to fuck, and you're attracted to the person, and they're attracted to you, and you've both had STI tests, and you have birth control, I would not say it's wrong. Let me ask you to recall something we discussed -- how long did it take you to decide you wanted to fuck despite being a virgin?"

"Never mind!" Raven said, laughing softly. "But you would have delayed, right?"

"Probably, and I have to say I believe it was better because we had our long conversation that morning and afternoon. Before that, you weren't ready for mind-blowing sex. Not that it wouldn't have been good, but it was WAY better than it would have been without the conversation."

"I believe you're right," Raven said.

"How did you meet the guy?"

"He was a customer I drove out to Palo Alto. I asked him for his number, which is something I would *never* have done without what happened between you and me."

"That's a positive sign," I said. "The challenge is figuring out how to best use your newfound freedom. That is something only you can decide. Ask yourself how you'll feel the following day if it turns out to be a one-night-stand and ask yourself if you're looking for a relationship or just some fun."

"Can't it be both? I mean, it was with you."

"Yes, of course. What I was trying to say was you should know what you want before you sleep with him, if you decide to do that."

"I didn't know what I wanted when I slept with you."

"Actually, you did. Now, you've had time to reflect on it, and discovered deeper meaning. But you knew what you wanted, and I'm not talking about orgasms!"

"You're right," Raven said. "Are you going to be in San Francisco soon?"

"I don't have any specific plans, but I could. That said, go on your date first, see how things go, then ask me again."

"Because you think I might fixate on you instead of developing a healthy relationship?"

"If you asked that question, you know the answer."

"I'll call you after my date!"

"Good decision! Talk to you soon."

We said 'goodbye', I hung up and went back to the Indian room.

XXI. Procreation is Sublime

January 23, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"She wants you to come to San Francisco, right?" Jessica asked.

"Yes, but she actually deferred the request until after her date."

"The little birdie is leaving the nest?"

"Yes. Exactly as intended. Not that I would object to being with her again, but it's better if she explores her newfound freedom on her own first."

"Catch and release?" Kara asked.

I chuckled, "Isn't that what 'random deflowerings' have mostly become? I mean, in the Subversive Era?"

"It basically started with that young woman from the jury," Jessica said. "Tiger, have you heard from her at all?"

"No."

"What was her name again?"

"Annita María de Jesús García."

"She was a nurse, right?"

"Nursing student," I replied. "I don't recall if she would have graduated last year or if she graduates this year."

"All the Evangelical girls were certainly like that," Kara observed. "A few times, then set free in every meaning of that word."

"Not all, Kara!" Jess corrected.

"True!" I agreed. "I did keep the best one!"

"Certainly the horniest!" Jessica declared with a smirk.

"Jess just has a different libido," Kara observed. "It's consistent, too. Except for the 'new toy' periods when we first married, and then when Suzanne joined us, she's always had a much lower libido."

"Which I knew, and which is why I was happy to negotiate our deal," Jessica said. "I'm happy how everything has turned out, even if there were rough patches. I'm certain none of the three of you have any complaints."

"No chance!" Kara exclaimed. "Well, except there aren't enough virgins available to make Abbie's movie!"

All of us, including Kara, laughed.

"She's writing a book instead," I said. "The working title is *First Time, Last Time*."

"And it has a penetrating plot?" Suzanne asked with a goofy smile.

Once again, all of us laughed.

"If I can return to our previous conversation," I interjected, "Jesse initiated the discussion, and I agreed to go with his decision. I suggested he speak to his moms, and they agreed to accept his decision as well. I'm going to guess he elects to go to Chicago Latin or British International, though he won't say or do anything before the playoffs are over."

"The city has allowed the gangs to take control of whole neighborhoods and even schools," Kara observed.

"Don't forget the 'War on Drugs'," I replied. "It's having the exact same effect as Prohibition -- growth of gangs and an escalation of violence. And it hasn't dented the flow of drugs into the country, despite continual claims of 'record drug interdiction'. Berke Breathed got it right in *Bloom County* over two decades ago when he quipped that the reaction of the cartels was simply to raise the price to cover their losses. Of course, with the sheer volume of drugs flowing in, even 'record' interdiction has little or no effect on supply or price. Not to mention things like Adderall!"

"That, and abuse of opioids, is going to lead to further controls," Jessica observed. "And the people who actually need them are going to suffer."

"Once again, confirming Ronald Reagan's comment on the nine most frightening words in the English language being -- *I'm from the government, and I'm here to help.*"

"And with that rant out of the way," Kara said with a smile, "may I suggest we go up to bed?"

"You may," I replied.

Jessica and Suzanne agreed, and the four of us left the Indian room and went upstairs.



January 24, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Friday, just before 10:00am, Kimmy buzzed me.

"There's a Karla Timmer on the line, saying she's returning your call."

"Thanks, Kimmy; put her through."

A few seconds later, the phone buzzed, and I picked up the handset.

"Hi! Thanks for calling back."

"You're welcome!" Karla exclaimed. "How are you?"

"Things are going very well. How is your son?"

"He's two and acting like it! I checked with Joost, and we'd love to have dinner with you when you're here. The 1st is fine, and we'll have you to our place, if that's OK."

"That sounds good. What time?"

"Let's say 17:30 for drinks; let me give you the address."

I wrote down the address she gave, then read it back to her.

"See you in five weeks!" I said once she'd confirmed I had the address correct.

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up. I now had plans for both Saturday and Sunday nights, leaving the weeknights free. I hadn't heard from Sari and assumed she'd been on an extended time away, which happened occasionally. If I didn't hear back from her, I was positive I could find plenty of ways to entertain myself in Amsterdam.

"Hot date?" Penny asked with a smirk.

"She's married and has a kid," I replied. "You know my rules."

"Unfortunately!"

"Don't you have work to do?" I asked with a smile.

"There's a *job* I want to do, but you won't let me!"

"Work, Penny!"

"You're just no fun!" she grouched good-naturedly.



Jesse

"What do you know about Trey Robinson?" I asked Simone when I saw her outside the cafeteria as I was going to lunch.

"Besides being a top lieutenant in the Gangster Disciples?"

"Yeah."

"His dad is an attorney who works at the same firm as my dad. They met at Harvard Law. His mom is an orthopedic surgeon at Lurie Children's Hospital, where my mom is a Nurse Manager. Why?"

"Because, according to Freddy, Trey is pressuring him. I have to ask -- how the heck do you end up in a gang with parents who easily make mid-six figures?"

"He and his parents had a falling out over his choice of friends and his drug use. I've overheard his dad and my dad discussing it."

"Usually, at least as the stories go, the rich kids are buying drugs, not selling or trafficking."

"Trey is the main pimp," Simone said. "You can guess why he wants girls from the sports teams."

"Have you talked to your parents?"

"My dad, because I knew he wouldn't instantly lose his shit the way my mom would. I want to go to private school next year, and he's OK with that, though he's a huge supporter of public education."

"Me, too, and so are my parents, but the school has gone seriously downhill in the past few years. Get rid of the gangs, and I think things would be a lot better, though CPS is having trouble hiring teachers and maintaining buildings."

"That's what my dad said," Simone agreed. "Are you thinking of going somewhere else?"

"It's an option," I replied. "But keep that to yourself."

Simone nodded, and we went into the cafeteria and got in line to get our food.

 Steve

I left the office at 2:00pm so that I could be home when Avanti arrived at 4:00pm. I was home a bit earlier than strictly necessary, so I changed into more comfortable clothes and went to my study. I turned on my computer, and after checking my personal mail, I accessed ancestry.com to see if any additional information had been uploaded.

Records were slowly being added, and I found additional census records for my dad, my grandparents, and my grandfather's first wife, but they didn't add much to what I already knew. At the rate things were going, it would take years, if not decades, for all the information to be available.

Of course, the authoritative source of information was my dad, but he had made it clear he wasn't interested in discussing it. I knew it was also the case that he might very well leave out information or shade things, and that wouldn't help. Steve Samet knew some things, but as he'd said, my dad and his mom had divorced, and he was estranged from his family.

I had just finished on ancestry.com when *adium* dinged, and I saw a message from Emma.

Rayleigh1: Hi!

NIKASteve: Hi! How are you?

Rayleigh1: Great! Counting the days until I move - just over four months.

NIKASteve: Looking forward to it!

Rayleigh1: Are you going on vacation this summer?

NIKASteve: I don't have anything planned at the moment. Why?

Rayleigh1: Just curious. Do you plan to be in San Fran before June?

NIKASteve: I'd say it's not likely. I was there on vacation, and then that customer

issue arose, which extended my stay for a day.

Rayleigh1: For which I'm grateful! Otherwise, I wouldn't have met you!

NIKASteve: True! I'm glad it worked out that way!

Rayleigh1: I bet! 😊

NIKASteve: Not just for that! I very much enjoy the intellectual interactions, and I enjoy mentoring.

Rayleigh1: I was teasing! But you knew that, didn't you?

NIKASteve: Of course!

Rayleigh1: What are the rules on overnights?

NIKASteve: You need permission from my wives, and you need to ask.

Rayleigh1: "Hi! Mind if I borrow your husband for the night so I can have him screw me senseless?"

NIKASteve: That pretty much sums it up! Their answer will be 'yes', so long as you don't try to abuse the privilege.

Rayleigh1: No chance! I plan to learn everything I can from you so I can work for you. The last thing I want to do is mess that up!

NIKASteve: Good.

Rayleigh1: But in the meantime...great sex!

NIKASteve: We're on the same page. Will you start karate as soon as you move?

Rayleigh1: That's the plan, yes. And come to Philosophy Club.

NIKASteve: I'm very much looking forward to that.

Rayleigh1: Me, too! Gotta run; lunch is almost over!

NIKASteve: L8r!

Rayleigh1: L8r! ❤️❤️

I closed *adium* and, a moment later, heard some of the kids come into the house.

 Birgit

"Hi, Dad!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know you were going to be home early."

"I don't normally clear my schedule with you," Dad replied with a smile. "It is on the calendar! Are you and your sister alone?"

"Yes. I'll meet my friends at 6:00pm for Chinese, then the gang is going to see *Kangaroo Jack*."

"Hi!" my mom said, coming to the door of Dad's study.

"Hi, Honey," Dad said.

"I'm going to shower and change," I said.

I got a hug, then went up to my room. I undressed, checked myself in the mirror, then got into the shower. I washed my hair and my body, then got out and dried off. I put on a pink bra and panty set. It was a bit cold out, so I opted for calf-length black socks instead of ankle socks. Once they were on, I put on black Chinos and a white blouse, then pulled on a cute red sweater. I'd put on my black boots when we went out because Dad preferred us not to wear shoes in the house, though it wasn't a rule.

I had just finished when my phone rang. I checked the screen, and it showed 'Libby'.

"Hi!" I exclaimed. "What's up?"

"Are you and Tomás hanging out tonight?"

"He's having dinner and going to the movies, but then he's going straight home because he, Jesse, and Nicholas have their game at 8:00am tomorrow and have to be at the rink by 6:45am. Why?"

"Wanna have a sleepover with Lilibeth and me?"

"And just how much sleeping is going to occur?" I asked in a teasing voice.

Libby laughed, "I didn't mean it that way, but if your mind went there...wait, what am I saying? Of course YOUR mind went there!"

"Duh!" I giggled. "I could, so long as I'm at karate at 10:00am."

"We were going to the hockey game, so we'll be up early, but we're young and don't need much sleep!"

"Let me check with my mom or my dad, but I'm sure it'll be OK. See you at the Chinese restaurant."

We said 'goodbye', and I closed my phone. I brushed my hair, tied it back with a red ribbon, then headed downstairs to find Mom or Dad.



Jesse

When I arrived home, I decided to call Kwame at college and talk to him about the situation.

"They never messed with hockey or football players," Kwame said after I explained what was going on, "but I guess that's changing. It's worse than last year?"

"Similar drug busts, but now the gangs are actively recruiting athletes. The Latin Kings are trying for a foothold, too."

"So it's not just the usual black gangs. I think you need to get out of there."

"That was my thought, too. On to more positive topics, I saw you scored a pair of goals in your game last week."

"Not bad for third line!" Kwame declared. "There's a good chance I'll make first line for next year. A bunch of guys are graduating, and I have the best stats of any Freshman. I heard from my dad you guys are kicking ass and taking names!"

"One more game in the group stage, then it's the semis and finals the following weekend. I think we should win the citywide tourney."

"Who will you face in the regionals?"

"Most likely either Oak Park or Waubonsie Valley. Mikey and Nicole are having a great tourney, but they lost to Waubonsie Valley during the regular season, so they have a tough game."

"Wish I could be there to see it, but I can't fly back. Is your Russian general friend going to be there?"

"Yes. He and Larisa are flying in next Friday to see the semis and the finals."

"She's a cute young thing!"

"You'll get no argument from me on that!"

"Sorry to cut this short, but I have a date! Let me know what happens at school."

"Will do. Thanks for listening."

"Any time, Bro! If you play for UW, maybe we'll see each other in a tourney!"

"We'll see!"

We said 'goodbye', I hung up, then went to my room to get ready to go out with the gang.

 Steve

Just after 4:00pm, the doorbell rang and I got up to answer it, but Ashley had scampered to the foyer before I had walked from my study. She opened the door and let Avanti in, then turned and walked past me, smirking.

"Hi!" Avanti exclaimed, setting down her bag.

"Hi," I said, picking up her bag and carrying it to what Kara called the Playroom, then closing and locking the door behind us.

"Who is here?" Avanti asked as I set her bag on the bed.

"Right now? The kids. Kara, Jess, and Suzanne will be home shortly, but everyone will go out at some point, then filter back in. I arranged for Chinese food to be delivered at 7:00pm. The plan, unless you object, is to go to Jesse's hockey game tomorrow morning at 8:00am. I planned for us to skip karate, and Birgit will cover my afternoon class. On Sunday, we'll have Philosophy Club, and then I'll take you home."

"That is what we discussed, except for the time of Jesse's hockey game, so no problem."

"How would you like to proceed?" I asked.

"You're my guru! It's up to you!"

"What is your goal for this weekend?"

"To achieve the final step of the union of body, mind, and spirit. To partake fully of each other's bodies, to share our life essences, and to approach nirvana!"

"No small goal!" I replied.

"And yet one we aim to achieve. I want you, as my guru, to decide how best to make me a woman. Once that is accomplished, then we seek maximum pleasure from each other. Not that I don't expect our first joining to be pleasurable, but that's not the point."

I nodded and moved Avanti's bag from the bed to a chair, then removed the silk cloth that covered the mirror. I folded it and put it on the other chair, then turned down the duvet on the bed. I moved in front of Avanti and began undressing her. When she was naked, I stepped back and took in her beauty. In many ways, she reminded me of her mother, but there were differences as well. Both had deep brown skin, but Avanti's mouth was a bit smaller, and her lips fuller; her nose was a bit smaller, but her cheekbones were higher; her hair was the same jet black and reached the small of her back; her legs with shorter and more muscular, and her hips were slightly wider.

I had seen her naked in the sauna, but this was a different context. I had maintained for most of my adult life that nudity did not imply sex, and my reaction to Avanti made that abundantly clear I was already rock-hard.

"Undress me, please," I requested.

Avanti smiled and repeated for me what I had done for her and then stepped back to look me up and down. She smiled, then stepped forward. I took her hand and moved to the bed. I got in and sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed, and

Avanti followed, sitting on my lap with her legs behind me, my erection trapped between us. I wrapped my arms around her, and we exchanged a soft kiss.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" Chelsea asked after I'd greeted her.

She'd come home with Eduardo because we weren't staying in the city for the weekend.

"Ryan, Arby, Matt W, Nick, and Tara are coming over at 10:00am," I said. "We plan to play until 6:00pm, then have dinner, and possibly see a movie. You and I can go out with them or do our own thing."

"We can go with them. I arranged with Wendy and Lisa to hang out while you play. They're both from Loyola and live out here."

"Wendy and Lisa? Seriously?"

Chelsea laughed softly, "Quite a few people have made that connection, but I don't see either of them ever appearing with Prince!"

"What do you plan to do?"

"Go to the mall, have lunch, then hang out with some other girls at Wendy's house, which is behind Rush Copley. I'll make sure I'm here in time for pizza. What are we doing tonight?"

"Ryan and Arby suggested we have dinner at Fuddruckers, then see *Kangaroo Jack*."

"What's the movie about?"

"A comedy about guys making a delivery for the mafia that's stolen by a kangaroo."

"That sounds fun, and I'm totally down for Fuddruckers, too."

"Let me call Arby and let him know. Will you drive?"

"You certainly can't!"

"Soon enough! Are you going to teach me?"

"Absolutely."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

As Avanti and I kissed, there was no doubt she was ready as I felt dampness on my shaft, so I moved my hand under her firm butt cheeks. I gently lifted her so that her labia were against my glans. Avanti broke our kiss and reached down between us to grasp my shaft. She began rubbing my glans along her slick labia, all the while staring deeply into my eyes.

Avanti positioned me at her entrance, then whispered, "Slowly."

I began lowering her onto my shaft, not breaking eye contact as my glans parted her labia and entered her slick, tight tunnel. Once I was sufficiently far inside her, Avanti wrapped both arms around me and ever so slowly sank down the final inches until her pubic hair meshed with mine.

"Body, mind, spirit," she breathed.

Avanti began squeezing her internal muscles, then leaned forward and rested her head on my shoulder, causing her nipples to press into my chest. I recalled her request, months before, to make her first time last as long as possible and resolved to fulfill that desire. I used my hands to encourage Avanti to move, and she began rocking her hips and grinding against me while continuing to tighten and relax her internal muscles.

The feeling was exquisite, and I simply savored the consummation of our relationship. A hitch in her breath, a soft moan, and ripples along my shaft evidenced Avanti's first orgasm, albeit a small one. She raised her head from my shoulder, blew out a long breath, and pressed her lips against mine.

Our tongues danced and swirled over the next thirty minutes as Avanti had a series of small orgasms. We were approaching physiological limits, so I maneuvered us to the missionary position and began gently thrusting in and out of Avanti's tight tunnel. She wrapped her arms and legs around me and met my thrusts, our bodies moving in perfect synchrony.

We slowly increased our pace until I felt my pleasure building to the point of no return. Thirty seconds later, I pushed in as deep as I could, ground against Avanti's clit, and groaned as I fired spurt after spurt of cum into her. Avanti had another orgasm, this one far stronger than the others, and when both our orgasms had passed, I kissed her, pulled out, and moved to my back.

I gently encouraged her into a cuddling position, but she resisted, instead moving her hand down and pressing her middle finger deep into her pussy. She withdrew it, put it in her mouth, and licked it clean, then repeated the process, but this time offered it to me. I sucked and slicked our combined juices from her finger, then kissed her. She then moved to cuddle with me.

We lay quietly together for about ten minutes before Avanti moved on top of me. She kissed me, smiled, and once again looked deeply into my eyes.

"May I taste your essence directly," she asked.

"Yes, and I wish to taste yours."

We exchanged a French kiss, then Avanti shifted, turned, and positioned herself so her head was over my groin and hers was over my face. When she took my glans into her mouth, I pressed my tongue between her labia, savoring the musky, coppery flavor I'd had a hint of from her finger. The combination of her tongue on my glans, and mine in her pussy, worked quickly to make me hard.

As I lapped up her juices and teased her clit with my tongue, Avanti experimented with her technique, eventually being able to get me most of the way into her mouth, sucking, licking, and stroking. Having had a release, I had plenty of time to pleasure her, bringing her off three times before I pulsed into her mouth. Avanti continued pleasuring me for several minutes after the last pulse, then turned so we could exchange a French kiss.

She had swallowed, which I was positive she would do, given her expressed desire to partake of my essence. Her tongue, of course, was lightly coated with my cum, just as my lips and tongue were lightly coated with hers. We kissed for several minutes, then Avanti stretched out on top of me, and I wrapped my arms around her. Once again, we lay quietly for about ten minutes.

"Do you have lubricant so we can complete the last act of coupling?" Avanti inquired.

"In the drawer of the nightstand," I said.

Avanti moved from on top of me, opened the drawer, and extracted the lubricant. She positioned herself to use her mouth to get me ready, and I watched in the mirror as she lovingly licked, sucked, and stroked me until I was erect. She opened the tube of lubricant, applied it liberally to my glans and shaft, then reached between her legs and rubbed some between her butt cheeks.

She closed the tube, set it on the nightstand, moved on top of me, and we exchanged a French kiss. She broke the kiss, stared deeply into my eyes, grasped my shaft, and positioned it against her rear entrance. She wriggled and squirmed, took a deep breath, let it out, and pushed against me. My glans popped into her rear, she let out a long slow breath, then slowly worked to get me completely inside her very tight butt.

When I was mostly inside her, she sat up, pushed down, and groaned as the last inch of my shaft entered her. She rested for a minute, then began to move slowly up and down and back and forth, squeezing her muscles tightly. About ten minutes later, I had my third release of the afternoon, pumping jet after jet of cum deep into her butt. Avanti kept me inside her until I softened, and then I led her to the shower so we could clean up.

She washed me thoroughly, her soft hands roaming my body as she spread lather, and then I did the same for her. When we were clean, I pulled her into my arms, and we stood in the warm spray, our bodies mashed together.

"Sublime," I said.

"Yes," Avanti agreed. "How long until dinner?"

"About an hour," I said.

"May I partake of your essence until then?"

"You may."

Avanti orally pleased me twice, and the second time, when she kissed me, she hadn't swallowed, which didn't surprise me. We shared my essence, washed our faces, dressed, and then left the Playroom. Our food arrived about ten minutes later, and we took it to the Indian room.

"First thoughts?" I asked as we began eating.

"That it would be easy to get lost in the pleasure and have it be purely hedonistic," Avanti said. "But pure hedonism is not the basis for a relationship between a guru and his student. I'm sure you agree."

I nodded, "Deep, intense philosophical discussion and a meeting of the minds is the key, and, for the most part, is what I strive for in my relationships. To put it in terms which are not crass, the mind meld precedes the physical meld. In the best relationships, the spiritual meld occurs before the physical meld."

"Why do I have a feeling there's a word you're trying to avoid?"

"Because you're an intelligent, well-educated young woman who is Anala Subramani's daughter!"

Avanti laughed softly, "All true!"

"You are also, to use a Russian phrase, «культурный» (*kulturny*), which in this context would best be translated as polite, proper, or cultured. I don't believe I've heard you use any coarse language in the time I've known you. That's no surprise, really, given your parents don't."

"I know those words, obviously, but as mom says, if you can make your point without using them, you should, and reserve the strongest words for a time

when no other word will do. I've yet to encounter a situation where I felt the need to use one of those words."

"I was like that for the longest time, but it was a function of a somewhat prudish upbringing, something which you absolutely did not experience. For me, using certain of those words was liberating. It's also the case that they provide distinctions. For example, consider the difference between 'make love', 'screw', and..."

"You can say it," Avanti said lightly after I left it hanging.

"You know the word, so there was no point. But you do agree those convey different things, right?"

"Yes, of course. How would you classify what we've done?"

"None of those words actually fit," I replied. "I believe what you said is the best answer -- the union of body, mind, and spirit. Partaking fully of each other's essence. What you wanted, and what we did, was an exercise in spirituality which involved my «lingam» and your «yoni». Of course, as I was taught, they are spiritual as well as physical."

"You can mention my mom with regard to sex! It won't bother me! I suspect you are aware that I'll discuss everything in detail with her over the next few weeks. And I'm sure you could infer from our joining that I had expert instruction. I don't think it does, but I should ask if it bothers you."

"It doesn't."

"May I ask if you've been with a mother and daughter before?"

"I have, on several occasions."

"And the youngest girl you've been with as an adult?"

"Fourteen, when I was thirty-eight, though I thought she was older."

"Which caused you to delay our coupling?"

"Indirectly, yes. That was part of the genesis of the rules change."

"And the oldest?" Avanti asked.

"Fifty-three when I was thirty-eight."

"You were fourteen your first time, right?"

"Yes, and she was twenty-three."

"Will our mentoring sessions on Saturdays include joining?"

"I understood that to be what you expected," I said. "I recall you suggesting a time together where we did nothing but partake of each other's essence."

"Yes. It is the most intimate and spiritual thing one can do, even more than putting your «lingam» in my «yoni». That, too, has spiritual meaning, but its perfect expression only comes in conception, something not possible for us."

"Is that something you would want?"

Avanti shook her head, "Besides the impossibility because of your vasectomy, it's unrealistic and would cause more problems than either of us would care to deal with, both if it were to happen now or in the future. But, procreation would be the ultimate culmination of the union of body, mind, and spirit."

"You make a very good point. Procreation is sublime. It was one of my overriding goals growing up, though not before the timing was right. Short of that, what would make this weekend sublime?"

"For you to decide what we do and how we do it. I will do anything you wish, however you wish."

"Did your mom tell you what I considered to be the most sublime sex?"

Avanti smiled, "Slow and sensual in the missionary position."

"Exactly right."

 Birgit

"Will any of our friends still be at Kenwood Academy next year?" I asked Libby as she, Lilibeth, and I walked towards her house for our sleepover.

"I don't think so," Libby said. "A few of Jesse's, but Luna is graduating, and Simone's parents are going to send her to a private school."

"Did you decide on which college?" I asked.

"BC," Libby replied. "It's perfect for pre-law."

And, I thought, because Lilibeth would be there in two years, though I was fairly certain Lilibeth would get back together with her former girlfriend.

"You're planning to go to UofC, right, Birgit?" Lilibeth asked.

"Yes. Mom teaches there, so it's really inexpensive, and it's a great school. I haven't decided between chemistry and chemical engineering, but I still have three years to decide. I know Libby is planning pre-law; what about you?"

"I'm leaning towards pre-med," Lilibeth said. "I ruled out computers because I see what my dad does, and it would drive me nuts."

"Me, too!" I agreed. "The only one of my siblings who is even considering anything in technology is Michael, but he wants to go into robotics or maybe aerospace."

"Like be an astronaut?" Lilibeth asked.

"No, he'd be a rocket scientist!" I giggled.

Both my friends laughed.

"Are you going to Jesse's game tomorrow, Birgit?" Libby asked.

"No. I'll go next week for the semifinals and finals, but they're in for sure, so tomorrow's game isn't important. The worst they can finish is in a tie, and they have the tiebreakers. Of course, that doesn't change Jesse's approach."

"I heard his Russian general friend will be here."

"He and his daughter are flying in on Friday evening."

"She's fourteen, right?" Libby asked.

"Yes, and she has her sights firmly set on Jesse! Dad thinks they'll eventually end up together, but I'm not so sure. I think Akiko would win a competition, but she's in Japan, which makes things difficult."

"What about you?"

"There's a good chance I haven't met him, and there is no chance I'm even considering something like that until after college! First, most of the boys our age are morons; second, most older guys think I'm too young."

"I told you the solution to that!" Lilibeth teased.

I laughed, "You did, but I prefer having sex with guys!"

We reached Libby's house about two minutes before curfew and went straight up to her room.

"We can share the bed, or you can sleep on the sofa," Libby said.

"And if I get into bed, just how much 'sleeping' is going to happen?" I asked with a smirk.

"That's up to you, Birgit," Lilibeth said. "If you're interested, I'll fulfill my promise to make you scream! And I bet Libby would help!"

"Can I ask why you're so set on having sex with me?"

"You have a great body, are enthusiastic, and uninhibited! Not to mention, I like how you taste, how you kiss, and how you use your tongue. I know you hate labels, but you're basically bi, even if you have an unhealthy attraction to dicks!"

I couldn't help but laugh, "Society would agree with you, but not for the same reason!"

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Libby said, shaking her head. "There are WAY too many prudes who are too concerned about who is doing what with whom! What do you guys think about using my parents' whirlpool? It's easily big enough for three."

"Sounds good to me!" Lilibeth agreed.

"You just want to see me naked!" I teased.

"DUH!" Lilibeth exclaimed.

"I'm down for a whirlpool," I said.

"Then let's go!" Libby exclaimed.



January 25, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I thought I discovered what was missing from our relationship when you first entered me last night," Avanti said as we snuggled early Saturday morning. "But sleeping spooned together was nothing short of amazing. Unfortunately, because of the rules, it'll be rare after this weekend if it ever happens."

"My wives would permit it on occasion, but that's not the source of the problem."

"No, it's not. It's my dad who would object, though not because I chose to become sexually active the day before I turned fifteen. Thank you for saying 'Happy Birthday' just after midnight, despite me having you in my mouth!"

"I couldn't allow that event to pass unmarked!"

"And I appreciate it. You know my dad would object because of who and what you are, not because of the sex."

"Yes. He's always been uncomfortable with my relationships and how I conduct my life. That said, he hasn't stood in the way of me rekindling my friendship with your mom. We're just very careful not to do anything that might cause concern in his mind."

"Mom would never, ever cheat," Avanti said.

"That wasn't what I was getting at," I replied. "Your dad is very conservative, so even a hug or kiss, as friends, would potentially cause offense. If you've noticed, we hug lightly, without full body contact, which is not my usual way, and there are no kisses on the cheeks, which, again, is common for me with married female friends."

"Except for Melanie Spencer!" Avanti teased.

"Yeah, well. Melanie has been doing that since she met Pete, trying to annoy him. But he knows she's trying to annoy him, so he doesn't let it bother him."

"What time do we have to leave?"

"About 7:20am," I replied. "We have about an hour, and we need to shower and eat."

"I won't object to just snuggling with you," Avanti said. "We'll have plenty of time later today for more active endeavors!"

What I found fascinating about Avanti was that she was determined not to allow sex to dominate our relationship. That was a very good thing, and it shouldn't

have surprised me, given how she viewed our relationship. The sex was awesome, and we'd continue doing it, but it wouldn't be the primary, or even secondary, focus of our interactions. Mentoring and karate would be at the forefront, along with deep philosophical conversations.

"Sounds good to me," I agreed.

 Birgit

"I'm surprised you stayed for breakfast," Libby said. "You're missing your cuddle time!"

"Dad is entertaining this weekend."

Libby laughed, "Which is shorthand for having sex!"

"Obviously, but you know we're circumspect about it."

"I can't imagine ANY guy in his position not being circumspect, given girls literally beg him to deflower them!"

"Just gross!" Lilibeth declared.

"I know it's not something you would ever do," Libby said, "but don't knock something you've never done!"

"It's OK to say that it doesn't interest you," I said. "And certainly OK to never do it, but it's important to understand that everyone gets to decide for themselves. Jesse is totally straight, but he doesn't think what his gay friends do is 'gross'. He has zero interest, but that's different."

"You're right, of course," Lilibeth agreed. "And you guys know how I feel about it, so I really don't need to keep repeating myself. It's not like either of you are trying to convince me to do it."

"That would be totally wrong," I said firmly. "And no, I didn't consider you asking me to have sex last night inappropriate because you know I actually do that on occasion. That's different from your situation."

"Can I ask a question?"

"What?"

"What does it taste like? You know, when a guy shoots in your mouth?"

"Guys taste slightly differently, just as girls do," I said. "It can be salty or bitter, but it can also be affected by what a guy eats. But it's not about the taste, really. It's about making him feel good."

"But what do you get out of it?"

"I think it's sexy," I said. "And I like how it feels when it pulses in my mouth. In a way, it's not all that different from going down on a girl without her reciprocating. I know you like doing that. As for the other thing, I love being penetrated, and I think Libby does, too."

"For sure! That's the best part. But I like tongues and lips, and I've yet to meet the guy who can perform cunnilingus better than a girl!"

"Uh-huh," I smirked.

"OK, besides your dad!" Libby said, laughing.

"That really doesn't bother you, Birgit?" Lilibeth asked.

"It really doesn't. He doesn't interfere with my sex life, and I'm not going to try to interfere with his. That could backfire horribly!"

"For sure," Libby agreed. "And I hate to rush you, but Lilibeth and I need to leave for the ice rink in less than ten minutes."

XXII. Intimidation

January 25, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"We're going to complete a perfect group stage!" I declared in the locker room before our match against Saint Patrick Catholic. "Don't let up! If we let up now, we'll never win the tournament! Forwards -- sharp, crisp passes and pucks on the net; Defense men -- take away the passing lanes and clear pucks! Let's win it!"

"RAH!" the rest of the team shouted in unison.

"MEN!" Coach Nelson shouted. "HIT THE ICE!"

"RAH!" we all shouted back.

We charged out of the locker room, at least as well as we could, wearing skates, and went straight to the ice for warmups. After stretching, Pete and I alternated in goal, and when the horn sounded, he picked up the pucks while I skated to the boards in front of the bench for Coach's final pep talk. For once, he changed his message.

"Bust 'em up!" he growled.

"RAH!"

Coach went conventional and put out the first lines, and I skated to the goal. As I did, I saw something that concerned me -- Trey Robinson and Jamal Washington, two Gangster Disciples, sitting in the Kenwood Academy section. I pushed any

concerns about that out of my mind and focused on the referee, who had the puck in his hand. He looked to the Saint Patrick keeper, who raised his stick. He looked at me, and I raised my stick.

Seconds later, he dropped the puck, and Kenton won the face-off to Tom, who skated across the center line and passed to Jack at the blue line. Jack skated along the boards, and when he got to the face-off circle to the right of the Saint Patrick goalie, he dropped the puck back to Freddy, who fired a one-timer as Tom crashed the net. The keeper gave up a rebound, and Tom fired it past him to put us up 1-0 at just twelve seconds into the game.

 Steve

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Jennifer exclaimed as we all leapt to our feet.

"They have to keep their foot on the gas, win big, and carry momentum into next weekend!" Josie declared.

"They'd better," I observed. "General Dmitry is going to be here. And Larisa."

"And our duck has enough focus to not let a pretty blonde distract him!" Jennifer replied.

"After last year's tournament, he's not going to let anything distract him," Libby added.

"Shush!" Jennifer ordered. "Do NOT mention that disaster!"

"What happened last year?" Avanti inquired.

"Don't ask!" Jennifer exclaimed.

"I'll explain later," I said to Avanti.

The guys absolutely kept their foot on the gas, racking up three more goals in the first period while only allowing three shots, which Jesse easily turned away.

The team was aggressive during the second period but didn't score any goals, and Jesse stoned two forwards who had good shots. If our guys continued to play the way they were playing, they were going to walk away with the trophy for winning the citywide tournament in a week's time.



Jesse

"What happened in the second period?" I asked Nicholas as we made our way back to the locker room with the score 4-0 and one period to go.

"I'm sure you saw their D really kicked it up a notch, and their goalie started closing his five-hole. Three of our first four were five-holes. We have to try for top shelf in the third and mix it up. You haven't had much work."

"A couple of good shots in the second, but that was it. Freddy, Mitch, and DeShawn have been playing perfect D, and the other guys are playing well, too."

"We're firing on all cylinders!" Freddy declared. "We put these guys away, then get ready to kick some serious butt!"

"Let's not think about next week just yet," Pete counseled. "We have one more period today!"

We reached the locker room, and most guys took off their jerseys and shoulder pads so they could change t-shirts. Coach Williams handed out bottles of ice-cold water to everyone, and we all chilled for about five minutes before putting on our pads and jerseys and heading back to the ice.

Saint Patrick came at us hard, trying to make a game of it, but we had things completely under control, not taking a single penalty and scoring a fifth goal. When the horn sounded, we lined up for the handshake, having won 5-0 and had a perfect record in the group stage.

After the handshake, we headed to the locker room for showers. Everyone was happy, but nobody was really celebrating because we had two hard games ahead of us, and we'd have to beat British International and the winner of the St. Rita--De La Salle game, which would follow our game next Saturday. Mikey and Nicole's team had made the playoffs; now it was a matter of them finding a way to beat Waubonsie Valley.

When I left the locker room, Missy was waiting for me, Fangsu was waiting for Mitch, and the four of us headed out to the parking lot. We got into Aunt Kara's SUV and headed to my house to hang out before going to lunch at Portillo's.

 Steve

"What happened last year?" Avanti asked as we relaxed in the Jacuzzi after having made love in the sauna after returning home from the hockey game.

"They crashed out of the tournament," I said. "Basically, they lost focus and had an off game. That was enough to lose to a team they should have easily beaten. They're determined not to repeat that this year."

"Is that girl Jesse met up with after the game his girlfriend?"

"One of," I replied.

Avanti laughed softly, "So, like father, like son?"

"I actually don't pay close attention to what Jesse does in that regard."

"Which fits your parenting style - you give your kids tremendous freedom and don't pry."

"I do my best, but there are times when it's tough to stay hands-off."

"You mean when you think they're making a mistake?"

"Better said as choosing sub-optimal behavior. When they make big mistakes, they usually come to me for advice."

"Which fits your personality and how you mentor your afternoon karate students."

"True."

"I've thought more about the last fifteen hours, and I'm convinced that this closeness is the entire point. Being physically intimate is wonderful, but being spiritually intimate is sublime."

"Yes, it is. That's something your mom taught me nearly twenty years ago, but I failed to actually internalize it and take it to heart until about seven years ago.'

"Your trip to Japan, right?"

"Yes. A combination of karate training, meditation, conversations with a Buddhist priest, and a very close, intimate relationship with an amazing young woman."

"Yuriko's friend, right?"

"Sakurako. I'd have made progress without her, but not nearly as much."

"And now your love for her is like a knight for his lady."

"I'd say that's an accurate description, given she's Hideki-san's wife."

"Do you plan to go back to Japan?"

"Eventually, but it's a very long trip, and I'd want to stay for an extended time. That makes it difficult. I'll probably go when the kids are all out of High School, which would be 2010 or thereabouts. And, of course, work and other considerations will dictate when I can go. But I will do it. I never asked, but have you traveled overseas other than to India?"

"To London and Paris, both when I was nine. I want to go back to both cities."

"I like London, but I prefer Gothenburg, Amsterdam, and Saint Petersburg."

"You're going to be in Amsterdam soon, right?"

"In just over a month."

"What's the most important thing I can do for you?" Avanti asked.

"Continue our deep, spiritual relationship, and not let it wane the way I did with your mother."

"And physically?" she asked, turning to look into my eyes.

"Anything and everything you do is pleasurable. Would you like to make love in the Jacuzzi?"

"Yes!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

Ryan, Arby, Matt W, Nick, and Tara all arrived by 9:55am for our first *Dungeons & Dragons* session.

"For this campaign, you'll need a rogue, a magic user, a healer, and someone skilled with a bow," I said. "All other skills are available from NPCs, either by hiring or attracting followers. It's OK to combine those skills, if you want, and dual class is perfectly OK. In my campaign, there's more need for finesse and problem-solving than for head-to-head *mêlée* combat."

"I'd like to play a dual-class rogue/sorcerer," Ryan said.

"Wizard for me," Arby said.

"Paladin," Nick said.

"Fighter," Matt said.

"Rogue," Tara said.

"That party will work pretty well," I observed. "This will be challenging, so roll 4d6 seven times and drop the lowest die and the lowest total. For HP, roll twice and take the better score."

It took about fifteen minutes for them to create their characters and select their skills and feats. Once they were ready, we began.

"All of you are in an inn about ten miles from Waterdeep on the Sword Coast. A young boy comes up to Brandon, the Paladin.

"Ser Palidan, my father has been kidnapped! Could you help?"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"I'd ask who died and left you in charge," Miyu teased when I arrived at the dōjō to lead Dad's afternoon class, "but I don't think either of us would be happy."

"No way! But for once, you have to do what I tell you!"

"Just wait, Birgit-chan! You and I will spar once I defeat your father!"

"Ha! Good luck with *that!*"

"It's a good thing your dad isn't here," Suzanne said with a smile. "He'd have both your butts in a sling for that kind of talk!"

"Well, he's not here, is he?" I asked. "And he put ME in charge!"

"It'll be for the last time, if he hears about you implying his rules don't apply when he's not here!"

"What-ever!" I giggled. "Don't you two need to line up?"

Promptly at 2:00pm, I began the class with meditation time, then light stretching.

"Today, we're going to do something dad has done privately with me, but I don't believe has been done at the dōjō. We're going to 'read' the white belt kata. What that means is that I want you to think about the moves, visualize the imagined combat, and describe each move in relation to that. This activity is called «分解» (*bunkai*), which means 'analysis' or 'breaking down into parts'.

"You do this by considering each movement and technique in each kata in response to multiple possible attacks -- that is, a move might be appropriate to fend off several different «基本» (*kihon*) -- the fundamental stances, punches, kicks, blocks, locks, and throws. The goal is to understand the possible scenarios to help us discover new techniques as well as understand the ones we know. In the end, the goal is improved «組手» (*kumite*)."

"Not to be difficult," Neil said, "but did your dad or «Shihan» Will authorize doing something that we've never done?"

"Yes," I replied. "I discussed with Dad what I planned to do today and he approved."

Neli nodded, as did several other students. I wasn't bothered by the question because it was a legitimate one, and Dad had predicted someone would ask.

"Let's begin with the ten kata in the «太極» (*Taikyoku*) series. Neil, would you describe the steps in «対局 初段» (*Taikyoku Shodan*), please?"

"Yes, Sensei!" he declared.

"I'm not a Sensei," I corrected. "Birgit-san would be appropriate."

"Yes, Birgit-san! Is it OK to simply use the English terms from the kata sheets?"

"Yes. Even «Shihan» Will doesn't know all the Japanese. Begin."

Neil nodded, "There are only two techniques used in this kata -- stepping punch and downward block, and the only stance used is the front stance. There are twenty moves consisting of eight downward blocks and twelve stepping punches, all in front stance. For each of the downward blocks, we're in the side-facing position; for each punch, we're in the square-facing position.

"On each step, keep your back straight and your chin tucked in without changing height as you move from one technique to the next, and your stances should always be the same width, length, and height, with the same weight distribution. Your breathing should be slow and natural, except for the «気合» (*kiai*) strikes on move eight and move sixteen."

Neil went on to describe all twenty steps, noting the direction to face and the strike or block used. I asked him to demonstrate and, with each step, imagine the attack he was trying to fend off. When he finished, I thanked him and asked him to sit.

"Miyu, would you do the same but give an alternate set of attacks against which you are defending?"

"Yes, Birgit-san!"

Miyu performed the kata and gave alternate explanations for each step. When she finished, I thanked her, and she sat down.

"Rachel, would you comment on what we just observed?"

"Me?" Rachel Kealty asked.

"Yes, please. Being a lower belt does not mean you have no powers of observation!"

"I knew that the kata were stylized fights, but I had never imagined an opponent. Now that we've done this, I have a very different impression of the kata and how they're to be used with sparring."

"Good," I replied. "That was the point of this exercise. Sensei Molly, would you explain and demonstrate «対局 ニダン» (*Taikyoku Nidan*)?"

"Yes, Birgit-san!" she replied.

 Albert

"Doctor Lisa said they're kicking you loose on Monday," I said to Bobby, the leukemia patient.

"Yes! Finally! My blast count is negligible. I'm officially in remission."

"Awesome. What do you want to do today?"

"*Risk*?"

"Sure. Billie is available to play, if you want. And so is Jake, next door."

"Four players? Cool!"

"Doctor Lisa said we could go to the day room."

He got out of bed, put on his robe, and we went to the day room where Bille and Jake were waiting with the *Risk* board, ready to begin the game.

"How long does your service project last?" Bobby asked as we began playing.

"Until the end of June. It appears I'll have to find someone else to beat at *Risk*!"

"You remember that boast in about ninety minutes!" Bobby declared.

"How long before you get out, Jake?" I asked.

"Tuesday, if my liver function is still normal. The downside is for six months to a year, I have to take extra precautions, like wearing masks when I'm around other people."

"What about school?"

"I'll have a tutor for the rest of the school year, same as I had while I was here waiting on the transplant. I should be able to go back to school in the Fall."

"What grade?" I asked.

"I'll be a Freshman at Morgan Park Academy. What about you?"

"Navy JROTC at William Howard Taft on the North Side."

"You're going to join the Navy?" Jake asked.

"I'm trying for an appointment to the Academy. I want to fly jets off carriers."

"Whoa! Do you fly?"

"I'm not allowed to have a license until I'm seventeen, but a Navy Commander has taught me to fly, and I can do everything from pre-flight to post-flight in a single-engine aircraft."

"Guys?" Bobby said. "Can we focus on the game, please?"

We both nodded and paid attention to the game with just occasional conversation. I ended up winning, but it was a close thing for most of the game until I finally broke through Bobby's lines with a few key rolls of the dice.

"The Navy Commander who is teaching you to fly, is he a jet pilot?" Jake asked as we put the game back into its box.

"She's a she," I replied. "And she's a former Surface Warfare Specialist who is now working on advanced weapons systems at the Naval Research Laboratory."

"Wait! A *girl* taught you to fly?"

"What's wrong with girls?" Billie asked.

"What's right with them?" Jake asked. "My sister is the biggest pain in the butt in history!"

"I have *three* sisters," I said with a grin.

"Oh, man! What do you do?"

"I spend a lot of time out of the house!" I chuckled.

"OK, you turkeys," Bille said, "I'm going to find someone who appreciates me!"

"I wasn't talking about cute girls!" I said quickly. "I was talking about *sisters*!"

"Nice try, Buster!" Billie declared. "I'm too old for you!"

I laughed, "You are cute, but I have a girlfriend. We've been together for about seven years."

"Hang on! You've had a girlfriend since you were six?"

"Yes. She lives in Leeds, in England. We met when we were both six, and we've been a couple ever since. I visit her every summer, and they visited at Christmas this year. And we chat on the computer."

"Weird," Bobby said.

That word perfectly described everything at the Compound, but I couldn't really discuss any of that because too many people freaked out about it. The reaction Jake and Bobby had to me, having had a girlfriend since I was six, was a perfect example of people not understanding.

"When will you be an Eagle Scout?" Billie asked.

"I have twelve of my thirteen 'mandatory requirement' merit badges completed, plus one elective. I need seven more electives in addition to the final mandatory one. This is my service project with my troop. I figure about eighteen months, and I should finish everything."

"That's prestigious. Not too many guys achieve that. I bet that will help with the Naval Academy."

"It should, along with recommendations from several current and retired officers. My dad has friends who have influence with both our congressman and our

senators, plus NJROTC units can nominate three candidates, and Honor Units, which William Howard Taft is, can nominate six. There are other options as well, including the Vice President. I should be able to receive a nomination from one of those sources. At that point, it's competitive like any other university, and about a third of the nominees receive appointments."

"What will you do if you don't get in?"

"First of all, I'm positive I'm going to be nominated and appointed, but if by some bizarre twist of fate I don't get in, I'll attend IIT and join the Navy ROTC unit. I'll be an officer when I graduate."

"It sounds as if you have your life fully mapped out," Billie observed.

"I have since I was little," I replied. "The only conflict is I can't marry Jane until after I graduate from the Academy. You're not allowed to be married or have any dependents."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Any chance we could hang out after I get out?" Bobby asked.

"Sure. I'll give you my number, and you can hang out with my friends and me on Friday or Saturday nights."

"Cool!"

"Jake, once you're allowed to be around groups of people, you're invited, too."

"Awesome!"

 Ashley

"Can Dad just stop?" Stephie grouched.

"Can you just mind your own business?" I asked.

"I don't get why you think it's OK that he basically fucks every girl he knows!"

"Totally not true!" I countered. "And even if he does, so what?! How does it hurt you? Do you see him interfering with you and your friends? And if you ever get your head out of your butt, he won't interfere with you and Nicholas, and Nicholas would be allowed to sleep over."

"He's such a dork! Nicholas, I mean. Who wants to play stupid video games?"

"All our brothers," I replied. "They enjoy them. And it's not like Jesse and Matthew don't have girlfriends! And once Michael realizes that Andi is really cute with a nice body, those two are going to be doing the horizontal bop in addition to playing video games and working on robots! And Dad won't object. You need to get off your high horse and let everyone live their lives the way they want to!"

"You just don't get it!" Stephie growled.

"Well, given nobody else at the Compound or at Aunt Elyse's house has any problem with it, you might want to consider that this is a *you* problem, not an *us* problem! Nobody is being hurt, everything is consensual, and Kara Mom, Mom, Suzanne, and Dad all agree. And on your point of 'every girl he knows', there are rules, and he follows them. I don't know for sure what they are, but you could ask Kara Mom, if you want."

"He and Birgit did it!" Stephe protested.

"I don't think so; no, actually, I'm sure they didn't. If *that* is your problem, you have your panties in a twist over something that didn't happen and something **Birgit** wanted to do, not Dad."

"And how do you know that, Miss Smarty Pants?"

"Seriously? Birgit was advertising! In fact, I'm positive that's part of why she had zero chance to get what she wanted -- if it *could* happen, it would have had to have happened where nobody knew about it. Not to mention, I'm reasonably certain I know the actual reason."

"What?" Stephe asked.

I shook my head, "First, I don't know for sure that I'm right. I'm pretty sure I am, but not sure enough to say it to anyone. And if I were to tell you *anything* about Dad, you'd use it to have an even bigger snit about things that don't concern you! If you're **THAT** concerned, go ask Dad. You know he'll tell you the truth."

"Hah! As if!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Stephe, you've been a bitch since you got your period, and it needs to stop. Now!"

"You don't understand! Just go away!"

"We're in *our* room," I replied. "You don't get to kick me out. If you want to leave, go for it."

Stephie got up from the sofa and stalked out of the room without another word. I felt I needed to say something to someone, but Dad was with Avanti, Suzanne was out with a friend, and Mom was at work. I decided to talk to Kara Mom because she was the 'Senior Wife' in Dad's arrangement. I went downstairs and found her in the Indian room, grading quizzes.

"OK to come in and talk?" I asked.

"Yes," Kara Mom replied. "I'm running out of red ink."

"That bad?"

"You have no idea! What's up?"

I shut the door and went to sit in one of the Papasan basket chairs next to her.

"Stephie is having a hissy fit about Dad again, and I think I know the source of the problem -- she's convinced Dad and Birgit had sex. I'm pretty sure that's not the case, but Stephie is convinced it happened."

Kara Mom didn't answer right away, so I sat quietly and waited until she did, about thirty seconds later.

"Normally, I would send you to your dad for questions about how he manages that part of his life, but it absolutely did not happen. I'll share something, but you have to promise never to repeat it."

"Promise."

"As you suspect, there is something that happened in the past that was the main reason for rejecting her request, but it was also the case that she was FAR too

obvious about what she wanted, and what she wanted was, in effect, to displace your mom, Suzanne, and me."

"That's...Birgit!" I giggled. "I was going to say 'nuts', but I think if you look up that word in the dictionary, her picture is there!"

"You are what my grandmother would have called 'a pistol!'"

"Right, because I don't come by it honestly!" I declared.

"No comment!" Kara Mom exclaimed.

"Well, if it's 'nature', it's not you. If it's nurture..." I smirked.

"Your dad is right! You are a little scamp!"

"Thank you!"

"I'll see if I can talk to Stephie, but I think, unfortunately, she has her mind made up."

"Sadly, I think you're right."

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"That was a lot of fun!" Arby declared. "Next week, same time, same place?"

"Absolutely!" I agreed.

Chelsea came in just then, and after a quick hug, the seven of us split between two cars, with Chelsea and my mom driving us to Fuddruckers. We could walk to the theatre from there, so Mom went home after she dropped off Tara, Arby, and Nick. Tara's mom would pick everyone up except Chelsea and me, and she'd drive us back to my house.

"How did your game go?" Chelsea asked when all of us were finally seated at Fuddruckers.

"It was a blast!" Tara declared. "Matt is a really good DM and came up with a really interesting campaign. It started with a little boy saying his dad had been kidnapped and our group trying to find out what happened. We had just rescued the dad from a group of bandits and discovered he had invented a magical device that could unlock any lock, but the plans and research had been stolen as well. But they weren't in the hideout -- the bandit leader had taken them and gone to Waterdeep to try to find someone who could actually build the device. Next Saturday, we'll investigate."

"I assume there's more to the story?" Chelsea inquired.

"Yes, but part of the fun is discovering that. And Matt is really good with twists and turns in his storytelling. And there's a good mix of stuff, so it's not all fighting."

"It's similar to the game I showed you," I said. "*Baldur's Gate*. It takes place on the Sword Coast, just like that computer game. In fact, the expansion was named *Tales of the Sword Coast*."

"And, of course," Ryan smirked, "we're all going to be Satan worshipers and commit suicide if our character dies!"

"Mom's stories about the moral panic about *D&D* are almost unbelievable," I said. "But they made TV movies that amped up the panic to the point where people were claiming that the game promoted Satanism, witchcraft, suicide, pornography, and murder. Of course, neatly ignoring that movies on HBO or at the theatre had the same themes. A TV movie, *Mazes and Monsters*, starring Tom Hanks, probably did the most to increase the panic.

"There was a *60 Minutes* special on it where Gary Gygax, who helped create the original game at TSR, said nobody blamed *Monopoly* for people going bankrupt, so it made no sense to blame *D&D* for all the stuff it was being accused of. It's fantasy, just like *Conan the Barbarian* or other high fantasy movies. Fortunately, all that insanity mostly ended by the time all of us were born."

"People need to get a grip," Tara declared.

"You're preaching to the choir!" I replied.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I said, answering my phone.

"Hi, Jesse. It's Luna. I assume you saw Trey and Jamal at the rink this morning."

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Simone said they were leaning hard on Deshawn and basically threatened to 'mess up' someone on the team if he didn't affiliate."

"There's never a good time for that kind of thing, but couldn't they have waited a few weeks?"

"Come on, Jesse! You know why they're doing it now."

"Because of the playoffs, they think they can exert pressure. What's Deshawn going to do?"

"He's basically screwed. If he tries to pretend to go along, they'll consider him a traitor when he tries to back off, and you know what happens then."

"Nothing good," I sighed. "I'm going to call Coach and let him know. Maybe he has some ideas."

"Are you doing anything tonight?"

"Missy and I are going out."

"What about tomorrow afternoon?"

"No plans, though I have some homework to finish after church. How about 3:00pm?"

"Great! See you then!"

We ended the call, and I scrolled in the address book to find Coach Nelson's number and pressed the call button.

"Nelson residence," he said when he answered the phone.

"Coach, it's Jesse Block. Do you have a moment?"

"Of course. What do you need?"

"I'm not sure if you're aware, but the Gangster Disciples and Latin Kings are targeting players on our team."

"Who?" he asked.

"Deshawn, Kenton, and Tomás, but there could be others. Two of the Gangster Disciples were at the rink today, and according to Luna Alonso and Simone Jackson, they threatened to harm someone on the team if Deshawn didn't affiliate."

"God damn it!" he swore, then quickly added, "Sorry, Jesse, I shouldn't have said that."

"I've said worse," I replied. "Don't worry about it. Is there anything you can think of that we can do?"

"I've been worried about this for years, and all the coaches have discussed it with the principal, the School Board, and the police, but nothing has happened. I'm sure you know the gang task force has tried to put undercover cops into the school."

"And we all know who they are," I replied. "They're too obvious -- new kid in school, loner, no friends from school, doesn't participate in any activities, doesn't go on dates, and so on. They got lucky with the drug bust a few years ago because someone got careless. I've never touched the stuff, but we all know where to get it and how to avoid the cops."

"Sadly, you're right. I think I need to call the Principal and discuss this with him."

"Just so you know, several kids from Kenwood Academy are talking about going to private schools, and some of the kids from Morgan Park are saying that school

is looking to pair with a different school. I was going to talk to you about it after the playoffs."

"What are you thinking, Jesse?"

"That I want to stay at Kenwood Academy, but I don't think I can."

"Please don't make any rash decisions. Let me see if there is anything at all I can do."

"No rash decisions, Coach. That's why I planned to talk to you after the playoffs. I need to focus on the games this weekend."

"Good. I'll see if I can reach Principal Thomas right away. See you at practice on Monday morning."

"See you then, Coach."

I closed the phone and put it back into my pocket.

"That was one of the reasons my parents moved me to the Lab School," Missy said.

"Please don't repeat this, but it's why my aunts moved my siblings there as well."

"What are you going to do?"

"Again, complete secrecy, please."

"Obviously."

"Once the playoffs are over, talk to the coaches from British International and Chicago Latin and see if they can get me a spot in their schools even though the application deadline for next year has passed."

"And if you can't?"

"Lane Tech, probably. After that, I'm not sure. Morgan Park doesn't have enough players, so they'd need to find a new association. If they do, that would be an option. Or I could play for a travel team, but that takes even more time than the High School team."

"That sucks! But forget that! Let's go have dinner, see a movie, and then fool around until you have to take me home."

"Deal!"



January 26, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Anyone want to take a guess at what 'aibohphobia' is?" I asked when Philosophy Club began.

There were numerous head shakes, and nobody spoke for at least thirty seconds.

"A fear of Sony's robotic dog?" Penny suggested.

I laughed, "Then, for me, it would be Peteophobia!"

Everyone laughed at the reference to Penny's high-strung Jack Russell Terrier.

"You're right about that dog being one bark away from a stroke!" Terry said. "Of course, you said that about his predecessor as well."

"High-strung dog for high-strung owner?" Liz teased.

Everyone laughed again.

"No, it's not about Aibo," I said. "But I wonder if Penny knows they make a Jack Russell Terrier model, the ERS-210, released in 2000?"

"How did I miss that?" she asked. "I'm going to have to check it out!"

"Steve, what's the phobia?" Danielle asked.

I held up a piece of construction paper with the word written in large block capitals.

"Any thoughts?"

I knew Sarah had solved it when she started laughing.

"Fear of palindromes, right?" she asked.

"Yes. A made-up phobia. It's from *The Computer Contradictionary*, which is a revision of *The Devil's DP Dictionary*, itself a parody in the form of Ambrose Bierce."

"DP?" Penny smirked.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Penelope! Data Processing!"

"Right, because when we referred to Dante's old firm as 'DP', it didn't mean what you think I think it means!"

"Behave, Penny!" I commanded.

"Right, because she's behaved exactly how often since you've known her?" Terry asked.

Everyone laughed.

"What was the point of the word?" Tabitha asked.

"Exactly that -- it's a word, but it's completely made up and nonsensical, using faux Greek. Of course, the medical profession does that with medical Latin and medical Greek, so the author is in good company there! Those are, even though they are medical and sound scientific, no less made-up words than 'aibohphobia'.

"Which means that any collection of letters that conveys meaning is a word, dictionaries and grammars to the contrary notwithstanding. Usually, it's trotted out against such cringeworthy words as 'irregardless', which is used in place of 'regardless' or 'irrespective'. Is there anyone here who does not know what 'irregardless' means?"

Everyone shook their head.

"Fundamentally, if a series of letters conveys a meaning, it's a word. What the objectors really mean is that you shouldn't use the word, whatever it is, in formal writing. I can pretty much guarantee an English teacher is going to mark it wrong, too. But in informal speech, it's just fine."

"I had a teacher who once said if it wasn't in the dictionary, it wasn't a word," John said. "But then again, I started High School in 1962!"

"Mrs. Olige, the English teacher at Milford Main who was already ancient by the time I had her in seventh grade, would probably have agreed with you," I said. "But new words enter the language all the time. Tens of thousands since you had your last English class, John. And it can take years before they appear in a printed, unabridged dictionary. That doesn't make them not words. Tell me, anyone, what's the common thing amongst these words -- accommodation, amazement, apostrophe, assassination, impartial, invulnerable, misplaced, road, submerge, and suspicious?"

"They don't seem to be related in any way," Gabby said about a minute later.

"Let me give you a clue. What they all have in common, they also have in common with 'break the ice', 'in one fell swoop', and 'clothes make the man'."

"Shakespeare!" Liz exclaimed. "I know that last one is one he first used, and I think the other two as well."

"Yes. All those words, all those phrases, and many, many more are first attested in Shakespeare's works. Whether he invented them or not, they were new, but now are common. In our times, words that are introduced are more likely than not related to science or technology in some way, but words like 'whataboutism' and phrases like 'Mutual Assured Destruction' are new as well.

"Dictionaries can only ever be descriptive, not proscriptive, as word meanings change. A good example is that when Shakespeare uses 'science', he doesn't mean the scientific method, but 'knowledge'. Other words have changed meanings over time, such as 'awful' originally meant to be 'full of awe' rather than something that was terrible. And 'terrible' originally meant 'to instill terror', not 'bad'. The same is true for 'terrific', which changed from 'frightening' to 'wonderful'.

"Similarly, grammars are observations combined with an attempt to control or corral what is best described as a bastard language. It's been said about English that it doesn't borrow words from other languages so much as follows them into alleys, beats them up, then rifles through their remains for loose vocabulary and grammar!"

Everyone laughed.

"It is an amazing mess of Germanic, Old Norse, French, Latin, and Greek," Liz said, "with smatterings of Spanish, Chinese, Dutch, Japanese, and other languages thrown in for good measure! And that's not even considering proper nouns."

"An example of how grammar has changed is pronouns," I said, "where modern English has morphed from those used in the King James Bible to our current set. Other than in extremely formal situations, mostly in church or amongst certain Christian sects, 'thee', 'thou', and 'thine' have fallen out of use. And I bet half the people in this room, as highly educated as you all are, don't know when to use 'who' or 'whom' without having to stop to think about it."

"Does anyone even use 'whom' anymore?" Isabella asked.

"STEVE!" Kara exclaimed. "For someone who disdains formal grammar and dictionaries, he probably follows grammar rules better than most anyone!"

"Even better," Natalie interjected, "is that he knows that the rule against ending sentences with prepositions was imposed by a few linguists who thought Latin was the height of all languages. Despite that knowledge, he almost never ends a sentence with a preposition."

"Guilty as charged," I chuckled. "But clear, precise communication is very important. It's far too easy to be misunderstood, and that's why at NIKA we have

a corporate style guide and conventions so that we're communicating in a clear, consistent manner. That said, it only applies to formal internal communications and communication with customers. It doesn't apply in casual emails between staff."

"So, dictionaries and grammars are descriptive," Heidi observed. "But NIKA's style guide is *prescriptive*."

"Just as are the style guides for newspapers and magazines," I replied. "My favorite is *The New Yorker*, which insists on using diereses for non-diphthong vowel sequences. You place a dieresis on the second vowel of words like 'coöperate' or 'reënter' to show that you voice both vowels, as opposed to a single sound. It looks like an umlaut, but it's not."

"Does anyone still use those?" Heidi asked.

"STEVE!" Liz, Penny, and Cindi all exclaimed at once.

XXIII. Another Disaster

January 26, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Philosophy Club had just ended when my mobile phone rang, and the display showed 'Raven'.

"Hi, Raven," I said when I flipped open the phone.

"Hi!"

"How did your date go?"

"Great! I'm going to see him again next Saturday. He's an engineer at Apple working on some top-secret stuff he can't discuss with anyone except his boss and two co-workers."

"That sounds like Apple. They're fanatical about secrecy."

"It would be weird to be in a relationship with someone who couldn't tell you what they do at work. It would be like being married to someone in the CIA!"

"There are actually quite a few jobs like that, if you think about it. You also do know what he does, just not the specific thing he's working on. It would be like dating someone who was a diplomat involved in critical secret negotiations."

"True," Raven agreed. "I wasn't saying I wouldn't, just that it would seem weird. But given what my family does, we don't have any secrets at work, really!"

"Right, because your dad would share the list of your best customers with a competitor!"

"Never mind!" Raven declared, laughing. "I get it."

"I'm happy you met someone."

"Mom asked if it was the reverse of her and Dad. I said it was too late and that I didn't get pregnant my first time! She laughed, and we had a good talk."

"I'm glad to hear that. It sounds as if what you need now is mentoring."

"I want to be with you again, but not if it might mess up a relationship with a guy I like."

"And that is the wisdom I hoped to instill in you."

"By repeated injections?" she teased.

I laughed, "Usually it's about 'fucking brains out', but it absolutely can be 'fucking brains in!'"

"I take it that's happened before?"

"A number of times, along with being a release or escape mechanism."

"A twist on the old 'keep them down on the farm' saying -- you can't keep them locked in a cage once they've had sex?"

I chuckled, "Something like that!"

"OK to call next week?"

"Always. If I don't answer, just leave a message in my voice mail, and I'll call you back. You can also send me a text message asking if I'm available."

"Cool! Talk to you in a week!"

I said 'goodbye', then Avanti and I went to the Playroom.

"We have about two hours before dinner," I said. "Tell me what you want."

"Something we haven't done that I want to try at least once -- I want you to 'fuck my brains out'! And yes, that's the first time I've used that word! Then our usual sublime, slow, sweet, and sensual way until we have to shower for dinner."

"Your wish is my command!"



Jesse

"What are you going to do?" Luna asked as we snuggled after fooling around for two hours.

"Wait for Coach Nelson to get back to me," I replied. "But I doubt there's anything that can be done short of the CPD or Feds busing all the gang leaders. But even then, new ones will rise from the ranks. That's what happened with the Mafia, and what finally did them in here in Chicago was the rise of the street gangs who dealt drugs. The Chicago Outfit still has unions and construction but very little street-level power. The only way to actually succeed is to end the 'War on Drugs'."

"You mean legalization?"

"I don't think anything else will work. They figured it out pretty quickly with booze and repealed Prohibition."

"And if Coach Nelson can't do anything?"

"Then, a week from Monday, after we win the Citywide Championship, I'll call Coach Brewster at Chicago Latin and Coach Anderson at British International. If Morgan Park pulls out of their agreement and makes one with a different school, I'll consider going there."

"I am SO glad I'm graduating in June!" Luna declared. "The really sick thing I heard was that Trey pimps girls as young as fourteen to older guys who pay \$500 bucks!"

"Which bothers you more? The age difference or the prostitution?"

"Prostitution, of course! But being with a guy in his fifties or whatever? I know some girls like that kind of thing, but not me!"

"Older guys?" I asked, then teased, "Or prostitution?"

Luna reached down, cupped my sack, and squeezed gently, "Are you done teasing me?"

"I believe the only rational answer is 'yes!'"

"I knew you were smart, Jesse! Unfortunately, I need to get home."

"Then let's go take a shower. Once we're done, I'll walk you home."

 Steve

"After-action report, please!" Kara demanded mirthfully after I returned from taking Avanti home.

"Exactly as you would expect when the goal was to complete the mind-meld. A score of '31' on Elyse's scale!"

"It could have been '63' if you had let me watch!" Kara groused playfully.

"That was not up to me," I replied. "You know this was truly about completing the bond, not about pleasure. Not that it wasn't extremely pleasurable. To be slightly crass, soft in the right places, tight in the right places, enthusiastic, and slightly submissive."

"How long will this last?" Jessica inquired.

"I'd say until she's ready to have a boyfriend. I believe she'll follow her mother's path, and that will be during her first year in college. I expect our Saturday sessions to decrease in frequency, likely to once or twice a month now that we've reached the first waypoint on the path she's walking."

"Interesting."

"Avanti made the point, correctly, that we cannot allow hedonism to control our relationship, as it could easily overwhelm us."

"That good?" Kara asked.

"Seriously, Kara?" Jessica asked. "Anala's daughter? If Tiger had to design the perfect woman, she'd look like Anala, have your libido, my focus, Suzanne's practicality, and our combined intelligence."

"Not a chance!" Kara said with a soft laugh. "My libido is over the top, even for Steve!"

"Which is why the three of us are HER spouses!" Suzanne declared. "Steve didn't go looking for two spouses for himself! It was self-defense against Kara!"

"As if ANY of you are complaining!" Kara declared primly.

"We're not that foolish," I chuckled. "But she does have a point!"

"All kidding aside, you have a similar libido," Suzanne observed. "The difference is that yours is about constant variety, whereas Kara rejects that idea. You both found a solution that satisfies your deepest physical and emotional needs and invited Jessica and me to be part of it."

"I know Jess has the marriage certificate, but that really was you and Kara trying to find a solution to your individual needs and your needs as a couple. Something was missing, and Jessica provided that thing. The three of you added me because, for whatever reason, Steve has always needed a trio of girls close to him. In the past, the third sometimes had sex with him and sometimes didn't. In this case, the only way a permanent third could work was as a true fourth."

"Interesting insights," I observed. "And I'd say reasonably accurate. This situation fits all of our needs, and I'm not sure any of us could truly be happy in any other arrangement. Life at the Compound suits all of us; we each complete the other three, and since Suzanne joined us, there have been zero conflicts in our relationship. And despite the accurate observation about variety being part of my libido, I could end all those other relationships now and be at peace."

"Could you truly act against your nature?" Jessica asked.

"I'm not sure it's my *true* nature. I think it is much more that my psyche developed in response to everything that happened until I returned from Japan. Planning to ask Kara to marry me was my admission that I could be happy with just her. When she returned from our year in the wilderness, she rejected that idea, not because of me, but because of her. That isn't a complaint or a regret, simply an observation."

"Which is why you haven't pushed back on any limits," Suzanne said. "Well, from us."

"Society, or my mom and Bethany, if you're referring to individuals, have nothing at all to say about it. Nor do any religious leaders or other scolds."

"Would you still be interested in fourteen-year-olds if society wasn't as insane as it has become?"

"Avanti was technically fourteen," I replied. "You know it has never been a question of age; it's always been a question of maturity. And that's where the problem lies -- society is doing its damndest to ensure teens are no longer mature. And both Kara and Jess can attest to the fact that it's affecting college students and medical students. Think about the most recent girls -- with the exception of Avanti, everyone since Kristin Jaeger has been at least sixteen, with most being eighteen. Before Kristin, it was Angelina, and that was a case of mistaken identity, if you will."

"And he did agree to chaperone the girls in Saint Martin," Kara said with a smirk. "They're all fifteen."

"And have been under Birgit's tutelage for their entire lives!" Jessica declared. "How could they *not* be extremely mature?"

"But, as we agreed, no girls under seventeen, period, after that."

"There will be one in about four years," Kara smirked. "Katherine Jaeger!"

"Kathy's daughters were born mature!" Jessica declared. "They're like our daughters."

"Nobody is like OUR daughters," I said, shaking my head. "Especially Ashley!"

"The most dangerous combination there is -- Birgit, but circumspect!" Suzanne declared.

"But without the unhealthy attraction to Steve," Kara added.

"The three of us have that!" Suzanne smirked.

"There is NOTHING unhealthy about it!" Jessica declared. "In fact, I think I could use a good dose of Tiger right now!"

"I am at my lady's beck and call!" I replied.

"Then let's go up to bed!"



January 27, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

After hockey practice early on Monday, Coach asked to speak to me privately.

"I spoke to Principal Thomas, and she promised to speak to someone in the School Board office, as well as the CPD school resource officer."

"The fact that we need a school resource officer ought to tell you everything you need to know!"

"Unfortunately."

"You know it won't do any good, right? Each individual gang can outnumber and outgun the cops. Combined? No chance. It had to be stopped before they infiltrated the schools."

"Sadly, I agree with you. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing until we win on Sunday. Then I'll discuss it with my moms and my dad and decide what to do."

"I suspect this may be the last year we have a hockey program."

"Unfortunately, I suspect you're right."

We shook hands, and I went to find Nicholas so we could drive to my house to leave Aunt Kara's SUV and walk to school.

"What are you going to do?" Nicholas asked.

"Change schools. You should talk to your mom and Tom about a school like Morgan Park or one of the Catholic schools with hockey teams. I'm positive Morgan Park will withdraw and make a deal with another school."

"This sucks."

"TELL me about it! I'm going to be a Senior in the Fall. The last thing I want to do is change schools, but if Morgan Park pulls out, that's the end, no matter what I decide to do."

"I'll talk to Mom when I get home. I think I'll have her call your moms, not your dad. They seem to still be having problems over her book."

"We need to stay out of that completely," I counseled.

"I agree!"



Steve

"Steve, I have a Doctor Mark Anders on the phone for you," Kimmy announced over the intercom. "He says it's about hockey."

"Put him through, please," I said with a heavy heart, knowing what was likely going to be said.

The phone buzzed a few seconds later.

"Hi, Doctor Anders," I said. "It's Steve Adams."

"Good morning, Mr. Adams. I'll cut right to the chase -- we're ending our hockey relationship with Kenwood Academy effective with the end of this school year."

"Jesse was reasonably sure that was going to happen. He's discussed the situation with me and his moms, but is waiting until after the championship game to do anything further."

"We're discussing a similar agreement with Wolcott, who would pull out of Chicago South and form a team called Chicago Prep Hockey South. Morgan Park would like to offer Jesse a scholarship for his Senior year."

"You'll need to discuss that with Jesse," I said. "I have no objections, but it's up to him."

"Is that because of your special situation with his mother?"

"No, it's because Jesse is almost seventeen and capable of making his own decisions. Let me give you his mobile phone number. I'll let Coach Nelson know about your decision."

I gave him Jesse's number, which he repeated back to ensure he had it correctly.

"Thank you for being calm about this," Doctor Anders said. "Hockey parents tend to be a bit excitable."

I chuckled, "Which is why it's a good thing you called me and not Jesse's moms, who are both the epitome of the stereotypical hockey moms!"

Doctor Anders laughed, "I have seen them at the games. They are, shall we say, enthusiastic in their support."

"That's one way to put it."

"Thanks for taking my call. I'll call Jesse after school today."

We said 'goodbye, ' and I checked my address book to find Coach Nelson's number. I dialed it, but it went to voice mail. That didn't surprise me, given he was a gym teacher, so I left a message asking him to call my mobile phone. He called back about two hours later.

"Doctor Anders from Morgan Park Academy called to say they intend to terminate their agreement with Kenwood Academy at the end of the school year," I said.

"Any chance you could talk them out of it?"

"I don't think so. They had concerns when we started this two years ago and again when the major drug bust happened. Gang involvement is the last straw."

"That's the end of our hockey program for sure," Coach Nelson said.

"I was positive that was the case."

"Where will Jesse play?"

I couldn't reveal Doctor Anders' offer to Jesse, as Jesse likely didn't know, so I had to be careful about what I said.

"That's up to him. He plans to call coaches after the playoffs so as not to open himself to any accusations of improper behavior. I'm positive there will be interest."

"You can count on that. I suppose I should make my own calls next week to look for a role where I can coach."

"If it were me, my first call would be to Doctor Anders."

"Gotcha," he said, intuiting what I was hoping to convey.

"You've been a great coach, and if you need a reference or any help, call me, please. I will move heaven and earth for you."

"Thanks, Mr. Adams."

"Steve."

"Rob."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"Now I'm really glad I'm sending my kids to private school," Penny observed.

"I believe in public education," I said. "The problem is that it's gone down the tubes, mostly due to politicization of the curriculum, but also the inability of the government to keep gangs and drugs out of the schools. And yes, I know there are drugs at private schools, but there is no gang infiltration, which makes it different."

"Rich white kids have access to a better class of drugs," Penny said. "And dealers tend to be more 'upscale'."

"I know you think it's poor black kids, but the main gang lieutenant at Kenwood has a dad who's a top litigator and a mom who's in nursing management at Lurie."

"What the fuck? They have to have half-a-mil in combined income!"

"I suspect so, but the point is that it's not a clear rich/poor divide, but gangs. And yes, I know gangs are more attractive to poor black and Hispanic kids, but affiliated kids can make a shedload of money, assuming they live long enough."

"That is the real problem, isn't it."

"It is."

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I said when I answered my phone while Simone and I were walking to the Compound after school.

"Jesse, this is Doctor Mark Anders from Morgan Park Academy."

"Good afternoon, Doctor. How are you?"

"Very good. Congratulations on being first seed for this coming weekend."

"Thank you."

"I spoke to your dad earlier, and he gave me your phone number. I let him know that the Board of Directors at Morgan Park Academy voted to end our association with Kenwood Academy at the end of this school year."

"I'm not surprised, given what Pete Werner has said."

"We concluded a new agreement with Wolcott. They're dissolving Chicago South, and we'll play as Chicago Prep Hockey South next school year. Your dad said he would notify Coach Nelson. I'm authorized to offer you a full scholarship to Morgan Park Academy if you'll play for us next year."

Which was a perfect solution, and solved the problem of it being well past application deadlines for private schools. I wanted to say 'yes' right away, but I felt I should at least discuss it with my moms and Dad before agreeing.

"Thank you very much for the offer," I said. "May I have a day to discuss it with my parents?"

"Yes, of course. Just call this number at any time to let me know."

"You'll hear from me no later than Wednesday."

"Great!"

We said 'goodbye,' and I closed my phone.

"What offer?" Simone asked.

"Complete secrecy?"

"Yes, of course! And you know I can keep a secret because nobody knows we're having sex every Monday!"

I chuckled, "Except my sisters, my moms..."

"You know what I meant!"

"Obviously! Morgan Park is ending the deal with Kenwood Academy and starting a new team with Wolcott. Doctor Anders offered me a full scholarship to Morgan Park if I agreed to play for them."

"And you didn't say 'yes' immediately? Your moms and your dad will agree, for sure!"

"I believe they will, but I want to talk to them before I say 'yes'. Doing that shows respect and ensures I have the freedom to have girls in my bed!"

Simone laughed, "Including me! Can we walk faster?"

 Steve

"What do you think?" Jennifer asked when she, Josie, and I sat down in my study after I returned from karate.

"I think it's up to Jesse," I replied. "Morgan Park is a very good school, and he absolutely has to go to a school where he can play hockey. Once they decided to end the agreement, Jesse's hand was basically forced. Their offer of a scholarship is a win-win -- they get a star goalie for a year, Jesse doesn't have to fight to get into a school, and they show respect to me for brokering the first deal."

"That's basically how we see it," Jennifer said. "I just hate pulling him out of public school and that he has to change schools for his Senior year."

"Agreed, but it's also the case that about half his friends are from Morgan Park as it is. And I'm sure some of the other kids will end up there, too."

"It really sucks for Coach Nelson," Josie said.

"I suggested he call Doctor Anders next Monday after the city championship. I suspect they'll be interested, though I know Chicago South has a coaching staff in place."

"I hate that this is distracting the kids from the coming weekend!" Jennifer said, clearly annoyed.

"Me, too," I agreed. If it had been me, I'd have probably waited until next month, but I also see the point of informing us as soon as they had decided to pull out. Did Jesse say what he intends to do?"

"He's going to come talk to you as soon as we're finished," Jennifer said. "I felt the three of us should make sure we're on the same page that it's truly Jesse's decision, and we won't interfere one way or the other."

"Just don't mention that to Her Royal Highness, Birgit the First, the Empress of Kenwood!" I chuckled.

"She's still bent out of shape because Kara and Jess decided to send the other kids to the Lab School without checking with her first?"

"She is my daughter," I replied.

"OK, but you being ticked at your mom for trying to run your life was legit," Jennifer said, "because she really WAS trying to run your life! Birgit has more freedom than any kid I know except maybe Jesse, and that's only because Birgit can't drive!"

"For which I thank Loki each day," I chuckled. "Can you imagine Miss 'Traffic Laws Are For Everyone Else' behind the wheel?"

"How is your 'no buying cars, no paying for insurance' going to work when the boys at the compound both get a pass because of hockey and JROTC?"

"Not well, I'm sure!" I replied. "I may have to back off on that a bit, though I won't buy a car for any of them. I may buy another car to accommodate, but

given neither Jess nor Kara need to drive to work, and I can ride in with Penny or Stephanie, we can make it work, I think."

"If there's nothing else, we'll send Jesse in," Josie said.

"OK."

They left, and about two minutes later, Jesse came in.

"Hi, Pops!"

"Did you decide what to do?"

"I can't think of anything that makes more sense than accepting Doctor Anders' offer of a scholarship. Pete was positive they were going to vote to end the relationship with us. This way, I can mostly play with the same kids. My concern is for Nicholas."

"I can speak to Tom, but I have to be very, very careful."

"I know. I've advised Nicholas to simply stay completely out of it. I'm sure if you call Doctor Anders, he can at least get Nicholas a spot, even if there isn't a scholarship. That might be a problem, though, because on a fireman's salary and a psychologist's salary, they might not be able to afford it."

I knew Tom and Bethany were doing pretty well, considering her salary as head of the Michelle G. Easton Center, plus Tom's side job when he wasn't on shift. That said, Morgan Park was *expensive*. One possible solution was for Nicholas to go to the Lab School, which he could do, and then play independently for the new Chicago Prep Hockey South team.

"He could go to the Lab School," I said. "He'd just need to speak to someone at Morgan Park about playing as an independent player, which is much easier for a private school team than a public school team."

"I'll mention that to him."

"So it's decided?"

"Yes. I'll call Doctor Anders in a few minutes. I assume I should have him talk to my moms about the details?"

"Yes, because you and I both value our lives! The Mama Ducks guard their parental role zealously!"

"TELL me about it!" Jesse said with a grin.

"Who is this going to hurt? I mean, besides potentially Coach Nelson?"

"George, Deshawn, Kenton, and Tomás will all need to find places in private schools with hockey teams. The other guys from Kenwood Academy are graduating."

"Talk to them and let me know if there are any concerns. I'll make some calls if need be, and I can always enlist help from Samantha, the Navy men, or the Alderman in the ward where NIKA has their office."

"Thanks, Pops!"

Jesse left, and I went to join my wives in the Indian room.



January 31, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Congratulations!" I said to Stephanie on Friday afternoon. "You now own the 'Murder House!'"

"Shut up, Big Brother!"

"Am I going to have trouble with my neighbors to the south? The last occupants disapproved of the Compound!"

"What did I do to deserve this abuse?"

"Be born in 1967 as my little sister! How are Patty and Davey doing with moving to a new house?"

"They're excited because they'll be closer to their cousins. I'm reconsidering the benefit of living next door to my idiot Big Brother!"

"You love me."

"Lucky for you, or I'd have killed you years ago!"

"Uh-huh."

"You're out a few days next week, right?"

"Yes. I leave for Arizona on Sunday afternoon after Jesse's game. I'll be out Monday and Tuesday and back in the office on Wednesday."

"When do you leave for Amsterdam?"

"On the 28th. I'll be gone that entire week, but I'll have my mobile, and I'll take my laptop with me."

"I'm still amazed at you and Dante being partners."

"Working with Dante has always been extremely profitable, even if he was a royal pain in the ass. He's calmed down a lot now that he's re-married and has a baby."

"She's what? Almost thirty years younger than he is?"

"And your point is?" I asked with a grin.

"Oh, shut up! Don't you have work to do?"

"You're in MY office, young lady!"

Stephanie laughed, stuck her tongue out at me, and hurried from the office. That bit of impishness brought to mind what that gesture and the usual response had meant in the past. It had created some of the best memories and some of the worst -- the height of ecstasy and the depths of despair. But that was all in the past, and those memories drove home that I'd made the correct decision about Birgit.



February 1, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

The mood in the locker room on Saturday was subdued. Word had quickly spread about Morgan Park, but that wasn't the bigger problem. The bigger problem was that Deshawn had been jumped the previous night. He hadn't been hurt too badly and could still play, but a message was being sent, and I was concerned for him because he was in an impossible situation.

"Guys," I said in a normal voice instead of the usual, more strident one I used to psych up the team. "We all know what happened. I know you've all seen *Major League*. Just like that situation, I guess there is only one thing left to do -- win the whole fucking thing!"

The guys all roared in laughter and cheers, and Coach Nelson smiled. I'd cleared with him what I was going to say, and he'd agreed that the special circumstances called for relaxing the rule against profanity.

"UP YOUR BUTT, JOBU!" Mitch declared.

Everyone roared again, and we stormed out of the locker room, ready to take on De La Salle for the right to play in the championship game.

 Steve

As soon as the guys left the locker room and I was sure I wouldn't be seen, I stepped inside. I unzipped the bag I was carrying and extracted a Jobu figurine, which I put on the table in the middle of the room. I set a candle in front of it and lit it. Next, I put a shot glass with tea in it next to the statute, as I felt rum created too big a risk. That completed, I left the locker room and joined my extended family in the stands. A few minutes later, General Dmitry and Larisa walked in and moved to the row behind us.

"Morning, Dmitry!" I said, standing up and extending my hand.

"Who are you, and what did you do with Stepa?" he asked with a grin.

I chuckled, "I only tease Katya that way now. The KGB deserves it!"

"Indeed!" Dmitry declared. "The Chekists were the WORST! The problem was that I could never be sure who in my unit was KGB. On the other hand, I wanted to shoot every single «замполит» (*zampolit*) I met during my entire career!"
("Political Officer")

"They'd have been the first ones I shot as well! The minute I had orders for combat, I'd give them their nine grams so I could actually execute an intelligent war plan!"

Dmitry laughed hard, "You would have made a terrible general officer, even if that is a good first plan!"

"Aren't we here to watch ice hockey?" Larisa asked.

"Yes, «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*)!" Dmitry said to Larisa. "I'm sorry!" ("Bunny Rabbit")

"Are you coming to the house after the game?"

"Yes, of course!"

We all sat down to watch the kids complete their warmups.



Jesse

I saw General Dmitry and Larisa sitting near Dad and raised my stick to them. Larisa waved back. I was looking forward to spending time with her, but I had to

put that out of my mind and focus on the game. If any of us lost focus, even for a few seconds, we'd crash out of the tournament. There was one thing of which I was certain -- that was NOT going to happen. We finished our warmups, and everyone skated to the bench for Coach's final pep talk.

"Men, you know what we have to do," Coach said in a normal tone of voice. "Go do it."

Five skaters and I took our positions silently and waited for the referee to drop the puck. When he did, Tom won the face-off, and Jack and Kenton quickly got the puck into De La Salle's end. Freddy and Mike followed them in and set up for an attack. Three sharp passes later, Freddy fired a long wrister at the De La Salle goalie. He caught it and held it for a face-off.

Only fourteen seconds had elapsed, so Coach left our first O and D lines on the ice. Tom won the face-off in the right-hand circle and pulled the puck back to Freddy, who fired it at the net as Jack and Kenton drove hard. This time, the keeper gave up a rebound, and Kenton smacked it into the net past the sprawling keeper.

The crowd roared and leapt to their feet as our guys mobbed Kenton. They skated to the bench, and Coach put out our second lines. This time, things went the other way, and I had to make three saves, the last one I caught and held for a face-off to allow our guys to regroup and Coach to change lines if he wanted. He did and put out our third O line but put back our first D line.

The first period was back-and-forth, with numerous shots on both goals, but nothing going in. When the horn sounded, we left the ice and headed to the locker room, leading 1-0. The surprise I'd arranged with Dad had the effect I wanted, and the team was laughing and cheering.

"Where did THAT come from?" Coach Williams said.

"I might have arranged it once I decided what speech I was going to give," I admitted.

"Where did you find it?" Pete asked.

"Dad called a lawyer friend who has connections in Hollywood and arranged to borrow the prop. It has to go back after we win the tourney tomorrow."

"Be careful with it, Men!" Coach Nelson commanded.

"I take back what I said!" Mitch exclaimed.

Everyone laughed. We all changed t-shirts, drank bottles of water, then headed back to the ice for the second period.

 Steve

"What do you think, Dima?" I asked.

"I think they are playing good, technical hockey, and that is how you win games!"

"Except for twenty-three years ago," I said, needling him.

"Tikhonov should have been sent to count trees for that embarrassment!" he declared.

"What, Papa?" Larisa asked.

I laughed hard, "Why am I not surprised? Larisa, ask Jesse about the 'Miracle on Ice'. He'll tell you all about it, even though he wasn't born! I remember watching it when I lived in Sweden."

"And winning a bet!" Jennifer smirked.

"Which paid off handsomely when the US defeated the USSR in the semi-finals!"

"Oh, I know about that!" Larisa declared. "Jesse told me about it. I just didn't understand the reference."

"Dad?" Birgit asked. "What was the bet?"

My wives and Jennifer all laughed because they knew the bet.

"I got a kiss if the US won," I said.

Birgit smirked, understanding the code word, "And I bet it was a very good kiss!"

"It was!" I agreed.

"Mr. Adams?" Doctor Anders said.

"Hi, Doctor."

"Would you mind introducing me? Jesse told me about his friends."

"Of course. Doctor Mark Anders, please meet Colonel General Dmitry Sergeyevich Grigoryev, Russian Army, retired, now Professor of Military History at Dartmouth. Dima, Doctor Anders is the President of the Board of Directors at

Morgan Park Academy, the school that partners with Kenwood Academy to field an ice hockey team."

The men shook hands.

"And his daughter, Larisa Dmitriyevna, who is in ninth grade."

"Pleased to meet you both," Doctor Anders said. "Thanks for coming to support the boys. General, might I take you, your daughter, and Jesse to lunch following the game?"

"It's OK, Dima," I said. "We'll see you after lunch."

"Then, yes," Dima agreed. "Thank you."

The kids came back onto the ice for the second period, and Doctor Anders returned to his seats a few rows behind us.

The second period was just as evenly matched as the first, though De La Salle tied the game before our guys got the goal back on a powerplay that resulted from what I felt was a weak call by the ref.

"We were lucky," I said. "The ref thought he saw something that didn't happen."

"Shut up, Steve!" Josie growled.

"They can't review it!" I countered. "There was no trip; Owen caught an edge. Weak calls are part of the game, and as Mike Ditka said, if one bad call costs you the game, it's on you, not on the officials."

"Stepa is correct," Dmitry said. "Both teams have to deal with the officials."

"Thank you, Dima!"

My Blackberry buzzed, and I pulled it from its holster and saw a message from Kimmy.

Shuttle Columbia broke up on re-entry

"Holy shit!" I breathed.

"What, Tiger?"

"Kimmy just messaged me that the Space Shuttle broke up on re-entry."

"NO!" Kara gasped. "Not again!"

I quickly dialed Kimmy's number.

"Hi, Steve," she said. "I'm watching it on TV right now."

"What are they saying."

"They're showing video that clearly shows the Shuttle disintegrating. NASA says it was completely destroyed with no hope of survivors."

"When did it happen?"

"About twenty-five minutes ago. I turned on CNN about five minutes ago and sent you the message."

"Thanks, Kimmy."

"How is Jesse's team doing?"

"Up by one after two periods. If you hear anything important, send me a message via BBM."

"I will."

I pressed the button to end the call and slid the Blackberry back into its holster.

"Kimmy said there's video, and NASA confirmed the Shuttle was completely destroyed. No survivors."

"This is a terrible day for mankind, Stepa," Dmitry observed.

"It is," I agreed as the boys skated back onto the ice.



Jesse

"We can do this," I said. All we have to do is maintain our focus and play good, technical hockey. Crisp passes, take away their passing lanes, and pucks on the net -- nothing fancy."

"Don't let up, Men," Coach said. "Let's bring this home!"

We left the locker room for the third period and took the ice. There was a weird murmuring from the crowd that I didn't understand. I looked up and saw my moms, my Dad, my extended family, and my friends all sitting, which meant whatever had happened wasn't to one of them or anything that might have put us at serious risk. Despite the feeling I had about the fans, I chased those thoughts away and focused on the most important matter at hand -- winning the game.

The referee dropped the puck, and from the start, it was an intense, end-to-end battle with neither team being able to gain the upper hand. I turned away eight shots, and the De La Salle keeper turned away nine. With just under two minutes to play, De La Salle dumped the puck into our end and pulled their goalie for a six-on-five attack. Fortunately, Freddy got to the puck first and, with a tricky angle shot, cleared it to center.

De La Salle cleared the zone and set up to bring the puck back in when the referee's arm went up, and he pointed to Owen, then signaled interference. It was a bullshit call, but given we'd scored on a powerplay in the second period on an equally bullshit call, all we could do was buckle down and survive the ninety-eight seconds.

Coach used his timeout, which I felt was a good idea, and we all skated to the bench. After the short rest, he put out our best penalty-killing team -- Freddy, Mike, Tomás, and Tom. We set up for the face-off, which was just outside our blue line, and I waited for the assault, which was sure to come.

And come it did, with De La Salle executing a perfect powerplay with their two-man advantage. Our penalty kill was up to the task, with Freddy blocking two shots and me blocking three, though I gave up rebounds on the first two. I caught the third one, resulting in a face-off to my left.

Both teams changed lines, with Paul, Deshawn, Mitch, and Nicholas coming onto the ice. Being the only forward, Nicholas moved to the face-off circle. He won the face-off back to Deshawn, who fired it at a hard angle, which cleared our zone and sent De La Salle scrambling back to their end to retrieve the puck and set up for another rush. I had a bad feeling as they charged down the ice and entered the zone, but at the last second, Nicholas poke-checked the De La Salle captain, and the puck trickled over the blue line. De La Salle had to clear, but there wasn't enough time to regroup, and four seconds later, the horn sounded, sending us to the finals.

XXIV. Off The Record

February 1, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"That was a totally bullshit penalty!" Jennifer groused.

"Pot. Kettle. Black."

"Don't be smug with me, Mister!"

"I'm just saying," I replied as the boys managed to kill off the penalty and win their semi-final game. We all jumped to our feet and roared approval as the guys skated to the handshake line.

"I need to go recover Jobu," I said once the players left the ice.

"I was shocked that your attorney friend could pull that off," Josie observed.

"Ben Jackson spent thirty years as an entertainment lawyer. He basically knows everyone, and he's probably owed more favors than anyone I know, including me."

"What did it cost you?" Jennifer asked.

"A case of Macallan 18, and it was worth it."

I left the stands and made my way to the locker room. I gained permission to enter from Coach Williams and went to get Jobu.

"Mr. Adams?" Mitch said. "Can you bring him tomorrow?"

"That was the plan," I said. "Great game, guys!"

I collected the figurine, candle, and shot glass, emptying the tea down the sink. I quickly left the locker room so that I could head for the dōjō with Kara, Suzanne, and my daughters.

 Jesse

"Hi!" Larisa exclaimed when I walked into the lobby.

I put down my gear, and she gave me a quick hug, but given the hard stare from General Dmitry, I was glad she didn't kiss me.

"Hi," I replied. "Hi, General Dmitry!"

"A good game, Jesse!" he declared. "Doctor Anders invited you, Larisa, and me to lunch. I accepted, and I hope that's OK."

"Yes, of course," I replied. "I assumed we'd spend time together, so I didn't make any other plans."

"Jesse," Albert said, coming up to me. "Did Dad talk to you?"

"About?"

"The Space Shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated on re-entry."

"Holy sh...crap!"

"Yeah."

That certainly explained the weird aura from the fans I'd sensed at the start of the third period.

"Will you let Dad know I'm going to lunch with Doctor Anders, General Dmitry, and Larisa?"

"He knows. He was there when Doctor Anders arranged it. I need to get going because of my service project, but I wanted to say 'good game', and I'll be here tomorrow."

"I appreciate it!"

We hugged, he left, and then Doctor Anders came up to us.

"How about Portillo's?" he suggested. "Authentic Chicago food for our visitors."

"I'm in for sure!" I agreed. "And I know General Dmitry likes hamburgers!"

"Something we generally did not have in East Germany or the Soviet Union! And after, I would not classify McDonald's as a 'hamburger'!"

"That's for sure!" Doctor Anders agreed. "Shall we go?"

"Let me put my gear in the SUV, please."

We walked to the parking lot, I stashed my gear in Aunt Kara's SUV, and then joined Doctor Anders, General Dmitry, and Larisa in his Mercedes for the drive to Portillo's.

 Steve

"Mr. Adams?" a tall, pretty blonde girl asked when I walked into the dōjō.

"Yes," I said.

"Hi, I'm Madalyn Fowler. I write for *The Midway*. I'm writing a series of articles on Hyde Park and wondered if I could interview you about the dōjō?"

"Which school?" I asked, not recognizing the name of the paper.

"The Lab School. I'm a Senior and plan to study journalism at Northwestern in the Fall. When I called the other day, the man who answered the phone said you were the best choice because you'd been at the dōjō for twenty years and are the highest-ranked instructor."

That had to have been Will, and it didn't surprise me that he'd pawned the interview off on me.

"I can do that after class today, if you want, or we can set another time."

"After class is fine. I'm going to watch the class so I can write about it."

"OK," I agreed.

I went into the office and shut the door.

"Thanks for warning me, «Shihan»!" I said with a friendly smile.

"You'll do it, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"I have one other thing -- Sharon called this morning and asked if I would allow you to cover her evening and weekend classes at her dōjō while she's on vacation. I said yes, but that I had no idea about your schedule."

"If I don't have any conflicts, I'd be happy to do it. When?"

"The first two weeks in April."

I pulled my Blackberry from its holster and checked my calendar.

"No conflicts," I said. "If I recall, she has classes Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday evenings and Saturday morning."

"That's correct."

"I'll put it on my calendar."

"Thanks. Shall we go see to our students?"

"Yes, «Shihan»!"

Dyani was asked to lead our meditation and warm-up exercises. I was not looking forward to June when she would receive her Master's, and, if things went according to her plans, would return to «Naabeehó Bináhásdzo», the Navajo Nation.

"Who's the girl?" Suzanne asked when we had completed our warm-ups.

"She's on the student newspaper at the Lab school."

"Dad?" Birgit said. "What did Madalyn want?"

"An interview," I replied. "She says she's writing about Hyde Park in *The Midway*. I take it you know her?"

"Yes. She's a Senior, her dad teaches computer science at the university, and her mom teaches English at the Lab School."

"Professor Fowler's daughter?" Kara asked.

"Yes," Birgit replied.

We had to end the conversation as both Birgit and I had students to train. About an hour later, after a quick shower, Kara, Suzanne, and my daughters left the dōjō, and I met Madalyn in the lobby.

"Starbucks?" I suggested.

"Sure!"

We left the dōjō and walked down Hyde Park Avenue to Starbucks, where I bought hot cocoa for Madalyn and hot tea for myself.

"So, what do you want to know?" I asked.

"I think with how the karate school started."

I recounted the history of the school that I'd learned from Sensei Jim and then from my own experiences, all the way through Sensei Jim moving to Japan and Will taking over.

"If you're the most senior, why aren't you the...what was the word you used?"

"«Shihan», which is best translated as master of the local school. There were several reasons, but the most important is that Will is the most qualified to be master. I serve as his right hand and provide advice and counsel. I'm better suited for that role."

"Why is that?"

"Because my style of instruction is not the best for most students. There is a small subset of those who study at the school who are my personal students."

"What's different about you?"

"Two things -- I strongly emphasize the philosophical and spiritual side of Shōtōkan, and I'm a demanding instructor. I don't cut anyone any slack, and I can be a real hard ass. It takes a total commitment to be my student."

"How many personal students do you have?"

"Ten out of about fifty regular students at the dojo. We also have around twenty casual students who don't attend classes regularly. My private class meets at 1:00pm today, if you're interested in observing."

"I am. Would it be OK if I had someone take a photo?"

"Birgit could do it," I said. "She's in the photography club and could bring her camera this afternoon. You know her, right?"

"Everyone knows Birgit!" Madalyn declared.

I laughed, "I am so not surprised by that revelation?!"

"We obviously don't have any classes together because she's a Freshman, and I'm a Senior. If she could take a photo and have it developed by the end of the week, that would work. Otherwise, I'll need to call someone with a Polaroid."

"I'm sure she could, either at Wolf Photo or in her friend Bob's darkroom."

"Bob Hansen?"

"Yes."

"He's one of our photographers."

"Let me call Birgit right now and check."

Madalyn nodded, and I slipped my RAZR from my pocket and pressed the first speed dial button.

"Empress of the Universe! How may you serve me?"

"Nothing like a big ego!" I chuckled. "Madalyn needs a photo for the newspaper. If she observes our private class, will you bring your camera and take one, then get it developed by Friday?"

"Sure! Do I get photo credit?"

"One sec, I'll ask," I replied, then looked to Madalyn and asked, "She wants to know if she gets a photo credit."

Madalyn laughed softly, "Yes, of course."

"She said yes, Pumpkin."

Birgit agreed to bring her camera, and I ended the call.

"Pumpkin?" Madalyn asked with a slight smile.

"A pet name and that call was off the record!"

"You know the rule is you have to say that *first*, before you say something you want 'off the record', right?"

I chuckled, "Now you sound like my friends Stan Jakes and Jasmine Prager!"

"The ones who write for the *Trib*?"

"Yes. I could arrange for you to meet them, if you wanted."

"Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes!"

"Then that comment was off the record," I replied.

Madalyn laughed softly, "Obviously. I was teasing, and I'm sure you knew that."

"I did. Any other questions for me at this point?"

"Just one, and it's off the record."

"What's that?"

"What has to happen for a girl to be able to go to bed with you?"

 Jesse

"This is a terrible thing," Dmitry said after Doctor Anders explained about ending the relationship with Kenwood Academy. "Can the police do anything?"

"They're outgunned and outmanned," I interjected. "They can't protect kids from gang pressure."

"And there is so much money involved," Doctor Anders said, "that urban youth who cannot use sports as a way out often turn to the gangs to gain wealth. Sadly, it leads to many of them dying, either from gang violence or drug overdose. The way our welfare system works only encourages it."

"What will you do, Jesse?" General Dmitri asked.

"Doctor Anders offered me a scholarship at Moran Park Academy so I can play on the new team they're forming."

"So not as bad as I had feared. Do you still have the same college plans?"

"Yes. University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'll take the SAT and ACT this Summer, then apply in September."

"What do you plan to study?" Doctor Anders asked.

"Business, with a minor in marketing. My goal is to work in an NHL front office or coach."

"You don't want to play?" Larisa asked.

"I do, but as I discussed with my brother, there are six hundred pilot slots on aircraft carriers, and those are limited to US citizens ages twenty-two to forty, roughly. There are only sixty NHL goalie slots open to everyone in the world

aged eighteen to forty. It's actually harder to be an NHL goalie than be assigned to fly jets off carriers!"

Dmitry laughed, "A point I had not considered! But you intend to play, do you not?"

"I'll probably play for the club team, not the NCAA team. I want to focus on my degree. I'll try to be involved in coaching youth teams in Madison."

"Are you going to hockey camp again this year?"

"Yes. I'll also be a coach at a session for younger kids."

"Very good," Doctor Anders said. "That kind of service is important, and I'm glad to see you doing that. Larisa, have you decided what you want to study in college?"

"Well, Mom thinks foreign relations is a good choice!" Larisa replied.

I laughed, "Her mom and grandfather were both Trade Attachés for the USSR and Russia."

"I think I'd prefer computers," Larisa said. "Dad thinks that's a good choice. And I'm sure your dad would be happy to hire me eventually!"

"I'm positive he would, given his relationship with your parents!"

"How did you meet?" Doctor Anders inquired.

"My dad met Larisa's mom in Austria in 1979 when he was on vacation. They dated for a time, though it was tough because of the Cold War. In the end, their

career goals were not compatible, and another friend, who was in the KGB, introduced her to then Colonel Dmitry. The rest is, as they say, history!"

"Your family's story seems very interesting," Doctor Anders observed.

"You have no idea!" I chuckled.

 Steve

Madalyn's out-of-the-blue request had caught me completely by surprise, as I hadn't detected even the slightest hint of flirting. She also wasn't, at least as far as I understood the situation, close enough to Birgit for that to be the source. Her features didn't remind me of anyone else I knew, and I didn't know many students who attended the Lab School beyond my daughters' new friends.

She was a Senior, so either seventeen or eighteen, which meant she was 'legal', so it wasn't completely out of the question. That said, I felt that before I gave her a direct answer, I needed to find out the source of her information without actually acknowledging that it was possible, on the off chance there was some ulterior motive behind her request.

"What makes you think that's possible?" I asked carefully.

"My cousin," Madalyn replied.

"And this cousin's name?" I asked.

"A good reporter never reveals her sources!" Madalyn countered.

I chuckled, "Good answer! I'll let that go, at least for the moment. How did this topic arise?"

"You don't think girls talk about sex?"

"I *know* girls talk about sex, but your request would indicate special knowledge about my situation. It also suggests knowing something about me because, in my experience, girls who are High School Seniors don't typically ask random thirty-nine-year-old men about going to bed together."

Of course, they did ask *me*, though the incidence of that was less frequent due both to society as well as me fast approaching forty.

"My source indicated her first time was with a very experienced older guy, and she strongly recommended that course of action. We had the discussion last Fall, and after thinking about it, I decided she was right. My first thought was once I started college in September, I'd find an upperclassman.

"I discussed it with my source and asked for details about how she went about it and what the guy was like. She told me, and a few days later, I asked if the same guy might be available. She said he was, and gave me your name, and said you had the freedom to provide the same experience.

"When the editor assigned me the task of writing articles about Hyde Park, I saw the chance and decided to see if it might be possible. As soon as I actually saw you, I was pretty sure it was what I wanted. Then, when I talked to you, I knew instantly. You give off this vibe that I can't exactly describe."

"Did your source tell you about the rules?" I asked.

"Yes. I had an STD test, and it was clean."

"Why not wait for college?"

"I'm impatient!" Madalyn declared. "And I think going to college with experience will make it a lot more fun."

"And is this completely off the record, or is it going to make front-page news?" I asked.

Madalyn laughed softly, "No front page news, but I might write an article about it for a website, anonymously, of course, and no names or identifying details."

"Website?" I asked.

"One where teens and college kids anonymously discuss sex and talk about their first times, relationships, and stuff like that."

"And how do you see this happening?"

"Well, unless I've been lied to and completely misunderstand anatomy, it involves you putting your penis in my vagina, among other activities!"

I laughed, "Yes, of course, but besides physiology, how did you see this working?"

"You mean, like, some kind of relationship? Or attending your Philosophy Club?"

"Ah, so you do know more than you're letting on! I have the idea that you have some kind of plan."

"I'd want to attend your Philosophy Club while I'm in college. I don't think I could do it before then without my parents asking uncomfortable questions."

"This won't determine my answer, but as a matter of trust, I'd like to know your source."

"You have to promise never to say anything because she didn't want me to say. She did say I could if you insisted, which she expected you might."

"I won't say a word," I replied. "But I need a promise from you."

"What's that?"

"This stops with you. No referrals."

"Can I ask why?"

"Because, in the past, that has gotten completely out of control. Society has changed, and despite you being eighteen, the level of freakout if it somehow becomes public would create all kinds of problems."

"My cousin says society has its head completely up its butt, which is why I'm interested in your Philosophy Club."

"Your cousin is correct. Who?"

"Antoinette Baldwin."



Jesse

"Papa, can I spend time with Jesse at his house?" Larisa asked General Dmitry.

"If Jesse's moms are there, yes, you may. Remember what we spoke about."

"My moms will be home all day," I said.

"And I remember, Papa!" Larisa declared. "See you at dinner!"

She took my hand and tugged gently. We left the main house, walked across the backyard, and into the coach house. I let my moms know we'd be in the Duck's Nest, and then Larisa and I went downstairs.

"According to my dad, I'm not allowed to kiss you. According to my mom, I'm allowed one kiss when I arrive and one when I leave."

"And according to you?" I asked.

Larisa laughed, "It's my business, not my dad's! Would you like a kiss?"

"I would!"

I held out my arms, and Larisa stepped close, putting her arms around me. We exchanged a soft kiss, though just our lips. She squeezed her arms tightly, then dropped them and stepped back.

"Did you like the kiss?" she asked with a sly smile.

"I did! Very much!"

"Which is what has my dad concerned!"

"Of that, I have no doubt! Did you like it?"

"A lot! And that's what has my *mom* concerned!"

I laughed, "Interesting perspectives!"

"Dad is concerned about what you might want to do; Mom is concerned about what I might want to do!"

"And what is it you want to do?" I asked with a grin.

"Play chess!" Larisa declared mirthfully.

 Steve

I didn't have long at home because I had to eat and return to the dōjō. Fortunately, Karl, Aaron, and Pete had planned an afternoon with Dmitry, so I didn't have to worry about entertaining him, which allowed me to participate in both karate classes at the dōjō. It had also facilitated the interview by Madalyn. Kara asked about that, but I demurred until after we ate so I could speak privately without my two precocious daughters commenting on the situation.

When we finished eating, Kara, Suzanne, and I went to the Indian room.

"What happened that you wanted to speak privately?" Kara asked.

"Come on, Kara!" Suzanne declared. "What *always* happens with Steve and pretty teenage girls?"

"You're not wrong," I chuckled. "The interview was what I expected, mostly about the history of the dōjō and how Will came to be «Shihan» instead of me. When we finished, she asked to go off the record and inquired what was necessary to be able to go to bed with me. I asked how she knew, and she said that reporters never revealed their sources."

"Cute!" Kara declared. "And, of course, that kind of witty answer was enough for you to say 'yes!'"

"I actually didn't say 'yes'. We discussed how she came to the conclusion that's what she wanted, and eventually, at the end, she revealed her cousin's name."

"CeCe?" Kara asked.

I shook my head, "Tall and blonde, but she doesn't actually look anything like CeCe. She's Antoinette's cousin. She'll be attending Northwestern for journalism. She asked about coming to Philosophy Club as well. I offered to introduce her to Stan and Jasmine, but that was after she'd made her request."

"Which was?"

"An expert deflowering."

"Of course!" Kara said, laughing. "Just when you thought you were out, they pull you back in!"

"Do NOT quote that non-existent movie to me!" I growled.

"Touchy, touch!" Kara teased. "Did you agree?"

"Not yet. She's going to observe my private class, and I'll answer her afterwards. Birgit is going to shoot a photo for the school paper, and she'll get a photo credit."

"She told us," Kara said.

"And there's a new twist."

"What's that?"

"She's going to write anonymously about her experience and post it to a website where teens and college kids exchange first-time stories, talk about relationships, and so on."

"I could watch, and she could interview me!" Kara exclaimed invitingly.

"You and your fetish!" I replied with a grin.

"I do have a plan," Kara smirked.

"Care to share?"

"NO! You'll find out when the time is right!"

Birgit appeared at the door to the Indian room.

"I have my camera, and I'm ready to go," she said.

"Then let's head back to the dōjō!"

I kissed Kara and Suzanne, then Birgit and I left the house.

"Did you hear anything more about the Space Shuttle?" I asked.

"No. CNN just kept playing the video. NASA said they were going to investigate, and the President was supposed to go on national TV. I think I'll pass on that!"

"Me, too!" I agreed.

"So, a 'kissing' bet, huh?" she asked with a smirk.

"As far as you know, all we did was kiss!"

"For definitions of 'kiss' from when we were little when it meant 'fuck!'" she giggled. "I want to hear the story!"

"Of course you do!" I chuckled.

The problem was that Birgit was, in all likelihood, going to live with Suzana and her family, and I had to weigh the pros and cons of revealing who it was to Birgit. I decided I could tell her a vague story, and that would protect Susana's privacy.

"You have to tell your favorite daughter!" Birgit declared.

"Ashley isn't here," I teased.

"Hey!" she protested.

"You walked right into that one, Pumpkin! And you know I don't have a favorite!"

"So, the story?"

"It started with a bet on the game between Sweden and the US. We bet twenty kronor, which was about five bucks, on the game. It ended in a tie, so neither of us had to pay off. We changed the bet to who would finish with more points in the tournament, the US or Sweden. They both finished the group stage with nine points, so we tied again.

Because they were both going into the medal round, we bet twenty kronor on which of the two would win the silver or bronze because we were sure the Soviets would win the gold. I made a comment that if anyone could figure out how to beat Russia, it was the US coach, Herb Brooks, and that led to another twenty-crown bet on the US/USSR game.

We watched that game together, and when it was tied 2-2, she offered to double the bet, and I accepted. Later, after the Soviets scored to make it 3-2, she offered to double again. I declined and pointed out the odds were lousy. She laughed, said she was positive the Russians were going to win, and bet eighty crowns against going to bed with me if the US won."

Birgit laughed, "And the US won, so you did, too!"

"I only asked for the cash," I said. "She demanded that I allow her to pay off the bet she actually made."

Birgit laughed again, "Of course she did! Even at sixteen or seventeen, you were you!"

"Perhaps."

"Will you answer how many girls you were with while you were in Sweden? I know about Karin, Pia, Katt, and Tina."

"Ten, if you count one American girl."

"Is this where I tease you about being a slacker?"

"Not if you know what's good for you!" I declared.

The conversation had to end because we arrived at the dōjō.

 Jesse

"We're evenly matched," Larisa said after we played two games, with each of us winning as white.

"I'd say," I agreed. "You and your dad play, right?"

"Yes. Similar to you and your mom. Does your dad still play?"

"Only occasionally; Mom One is better."

"They both played in High School, right?"

"Yes. They were on the chess team. That's how they met. Did you want a drink before the next game?"

"I want a kiss!"

"That will use up your quota!"

Larisa laughed, "I'm not going to tell if you don't!"

I held out my arms, and once again, she stepped into them, wrapping her arms around me. I hugged her tightly, enjoying the feel of her firm body against mine. Our lips touched, and this time, I felt her part her lips, so I very carefully slid my tongue forward until the tip touched the tip of Larisa's tongue. She opened her mouth wider, and we shared a soft French kiss that lasted about thirty seconds.

"Whew!" Larisa breathed out when we broke the kiss. "I, um, think I know what Mom is worried about!"

"And I think it's obvious I know what your dad is worried about!"

Larisa laughed and surprised me by pushing her hips slightly forward so that my erection pressed onto her thigh.

"Very obvious! Do you want to keep kissing?"

"Do you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Lots."

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"This is a good point to take our afternoon break," I said.

The adventuring party had just located a secret door in the floor of the blacksmith's shop and were about to investigate it in search of the schematics for the lock-opening device.

"Is it possible for my character to have a girlfriend?" Nick asked.

"Well, it is fantasy!" Tara teased.

"Be nice, Tara!" I said, even though it was a funny response. "I don't see why not, Nick. You can meet a girl in the tavern the next time you're there."

"What's the saving throw to resist?" Arby asked with a grin.

"Hey, it's fantasy, as I said," Tara interjected. "So Nick might even get lucky!"

"Tara," I said firmly.

"Sorry, Nick."

"It's OK," he said. "I'm used to it from you! You're like my sister in just about every way!"

"I like giving you a hard time," Tara said. "And Matt can give me a *hard* time anytime he wants!"

I laughed because Tara had teased that way off and on.

"You ask Chelsea what she thinks about that idea and get back to me."

"No chance!" Tara declared. "She's a friend! I'm also not going to be the 'other woman', but if you're ever single..."

"Fat chance of THAT," Matt W declared. "He's been hers since he was five, and I don't see that ever changing!"

"Oh, I agree," Tara said. "But that doesn't mean not saying I'm interested!"

"And I'm flattered," I said.

"Have you heard anything at all from Maggie?" Nick asked.

"No. She's at Aurora Christian now, and her parents are keeping her on a very short leash."

"That really stinks," Ryan declared. "She was one of our best actresses."

"I know."

"Think there's any chance that Mr. Fruits allows the pagan ritual in *The Crucible*?" Tara asked.

I laughed, "Right! Because naked teenagers on stage wouldn't get him arrested or anything! You know it'll be handled by reference, the same as it is in the play!"

"What role do you want, Matt?" Tara asked.

"I was thinking John Proctor because I really don't want to be Reverend Samuel Parris, the prosecutor. I need to review the play again to be sure. How about you?"

"Abigail Williams, the maid. Nick, you should try for Reverend Parris."

"If Matt's going for John, I probably will."

Everyone took turns using the bathroom, we got fresh drinks, then went back to the dining room table to continue the adventure.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

"What do you want the photo to show?" Birgit asked Madalyn.

"Maybe your dad and one of his students in a fighting pose, with the other students in the background?"

"Dad?"

"Sure. Miyu, will you do the honors?"

"Yes, Sensei!"

Birgit instructed everyone where to sit, kneel, or stand and framed the photo.

"Miyu-chan, could you hold your leg like you're about to strike Dad's side?"

"Yes, Birgit-chan!"

Miyu stood on one leg and extended the other one, with her knee slightly bent, giving the impression she was executing a kick. Birgit quickly snapped three photos to ensure she had a good one.

"All set," Birgit declared. "Madalyn, I'll see Bob tomorrow, and we'll develop the film. You'll have the photo on Monday."

"Great! Thanks! I'll need everyone to sign a release for the photo, please."

I signed first, followed by my students. As others were signing, Dyani pulled me aside.

"My last day is going to be June 10th," she said. "I'll leave for Arizona on the 11th."

"Your job is all set?"

"Yes. My first assignment is to assist in improving the water supply."

"You plan to live with your sister, right?"

"Yes, at first."

"I'm going to miss you!"

"And I'll miss you. You know you're welcome to visit at any time."

"For the next few years, I'll be making quarterly trips to the Phoenix area. That will provide an opportunity to visit."

"Great! Can I ask for a special favor?"

"Yes, of course. What?"

"To spend some time alone with you before I go home."

"I'd like that."

She smiled, and we stepped back to join the others. Madalyn interviewed Neil, Miyu, and Rachel Kealty.

"I think I have everything I need now," she said. "I'll email you a draft, if you'd like."

"I would," I said. "Let me get a card from my wallet with my email and phone number."

I went to the locker room, retrieved one of my double-sided cards with both my work and home information, and handed it to her.

"Thanks! Birgit, do you mind if I speak to your dad privately for a moment?"

"I don't mind," Birgit replied with a slight smile.

"So?" Madalyn asked once Birgit had walked away.

"Yes, but I'll be out of town for a few days. How about 1:00pm, a week from tomorrow?"

"Sure! See you then!"

I went to the locker room, changed, and then Birgit, Avanti, and I walked back to the house. Birgit went up to her room, and Avanti and I went to the Playroom to make love and have our mentoring session.

 Jesse

Larisa and I had kissed for about fifteen minutes before she suggested we play another game of chess. We actually played two, with each of us winning as white, before we went upstairs to get a drink, then returned to the Duck's Nest. She surprised me by sitting on my lap, and we kissed in between taking drinks.

"How much do you like me, Jesse?" she asked.

"A lot," I replied.

"Obviously!" she giggled, wiggling in my lap.

"Yes, but besides that! I enjoy spending time with you and playing chess. I'm very glad you came to visit."

"And you want to go to bed together?"

"I do, but it's not up to me."

"I think I want that, too, but...well, I'm not sure."

"And that's OK. You shouldn't do something you're not ready to do."

"You're OK with kissing more without doing that?"

"Yes, of course!"

She smiled, took my bottle of Coke, and set it on the table with hers. She took my hand and moved it to her sweater-covered breast.

"This is the limit, OK?"

"Yes," I agreed, savoring the feel of her firm breast.

We kissed, and I gently squeezed her breast, then ran my thumb over the hard nub of her nipple. Larisa moaned softly into my mouth and kissed me fiercely. I was positive that with a bit of effort, I could easily move things forward, but I didn't want to do anything that might cause trouble, now or later. After a minute, she broke the kiss, put her head on my shoulder, and sighed deeply.

"Soon, Jesse," she said. "Soon."

 Birgit

"Where are you going to school next year?" I asked Tomás after we had fucked twice.

"I'm not sure yet, but Dad is talking to Chicago Latin and Morgan Park. It's a bit late to get into Chicago Latin, but Dad has a friend with connections, so it might work out."

"I was pretty upset with my moms for not talking to me about moving to the Lab School, but I'm really glad they did."

"Why were you upset?"

"Because they didn't ask, they just announced it was happening."

"And that offended the delicate sensibilities of Empress Birgit?"

"Yes! I should at least have a say!"

"If you're complaining about ANYTHING, you're way out of line! Seriously, my parents are OK, but yours are the coolest on the planet! Do you think my parents would let us use my bed for this? Or be happy that we're going it at all? Especially with Libby joining us sometimes?"

"I think your dad might be jealous, but he could never admit that to your mom and live!"

"Truth!" Tomás declared. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Hanging out with Jesse, Larisa, Mitch, and Fangsu. You could join us if you wanted."

"I have to check with my mom. Can I use the phone?"

"Sure."

He got out of bed, and I stared at his athletic body, including a really cute ass. I was tempted to suggest using my toy, but I wasn't sure how he'd react. I felt my

best option was to wait for the trip to Saint Martin, where Bob and I could play together. Tomás received permission, and came back to bed and climbed in.

"We have about an hour before we have to meet Jesse and the others," I said.
"Sixty-nine and fuck?"

"Yes!"

 Steve

"So, now that you've had a week to contemplate last weekend, what do you think?" I asked Avanti as we snuggled naked in bed.

"I was never in any doubt about it," she said. "Not for a single second from the time I first met you. And it absolutely fulfilled my needs and desires and brought me great pleasure. More importantly, we bonded completely, merging our bodies to complete the merger of our souls. It was a sublime, spiritual experience and was exactly what I wanted and needed."

"Good. And I agree with your assessment."

Avanti moved on top of me, crossed her arms, and rested her chin on them.

"And my skills?"

I grinned, "Sufficient to purpose!"

She laughed, lifted her head, and smacked me lightly on the shoulder before re-crossing her arms and resting her head.

"You know I won't compare," I said. "But I very much enjoyed everything we did together, and it provided exquisite physical pleasure in addition to the spiritual fulfillment. And to answer your unasked question in a way I feel appropriate, you and your mom are different because you are different people. And that's a good thing."

"You actually think I want to know?"

"I do. It's a natural curiosity, but you're also mature enough to not ask directly. I am curious about your conversation with your mom."

Avanti laughed softly, "I thanked her for teaching you how to have spiritual sex and for helping you explore the upper limits of physiology and stamina."

"She did do all of that," I replied. "She wasn't my guru, but she did take on that role after a fashion. But as I said, I failed to internalize those lessons until I went to Japan several years later."

"But you did internalize them, and to my extreme benefit! May I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"Have you ever been penetrated?"

"Yes. The first time was in High School with a vibrator, then again in college with a vibrator and a dildo. Since then, I've allowed girls to do that if they've requested it."

"Do you like it?"

"I think the best way to answer that is to say that I like giving pleasure, and if that provides the girl with pleasure, I'll agree."

"Is that the only thing you do for that reason?"

"Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that I gain physical pleasure from all other activities; no, in the sense that everything I do I do because it brings the girl pleasure."

"That seems awfully submissive for someone who has such a strong personality. I would expect you to, in most situations, be dominant."

"Your mom discovered that's contrary to my nature. And while I do have a strong personality and can be very aggressive, my guiding philosophy is to always seek out the 'win-win' scenario, which is what leads to my behavior in bed. Mutual fulfillment, in at least equal measures, though, in a sense, I get off on giving the girl extreme pleasure."

"Mom suggests that you have some deep-seated psychological need to be polyamorous."

"I'd say she's right, though I can't say exactly what it was that caused that. I will say it likely has to do with everything that happened from puberty to college graduation. I made one serious attempt at pure monogamy, and I failed miserably."

"You reject all externally imposed value systems, though if I had to describe you, I'd say you were more Buddhist than anything."

"I'd say that's reasonable, though I call myself eclectic. Do you plan to marry a Hindu?"

"It's not a requirement for me the way it was for my mom. I'm much more in tune with you on spirituality than I am with my mom or dad. Remember that for when the time comes for you to help me select my lifemate."

"I will. I am curious about something."

"What's that?"

"Your reaction to me fulfilling your request to 'fuck your brains out'."

"It was exciting and pleasurable, but I strongly prefer either of your preferred ways -- sitting up or missionary."

"That doesn't surprise me. I won't initiate or offer that; you'll need to ask."

Avanti smiled. "No, you'll discern if that's what we need to do. You're the guru, and I'm the student."

"That's true, but today, I'll give you the option of what to do until dinner. If you just want to talk, that's fine."

"I wish to partake of your essence, share it with you, then make love sitting up."

"Then that's what we'll do."

XXV. Who Lit The Fuse?

February 1, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Can I ask you something very private?" Larisa inquired when we were hanging out at the 'Murder House' with the girls who were daughters of my dad's friends who were at Guys' Night.

"Sure. Let's go into the study. Aunt Stephanie won't have a problem with it."

We went into the study, where Stephanie and Joel had their two computers and some comfortable chairs similar to Dad's wingback chairs. I shut the door behind us, and we sat down in two of the chairs.

"It's really private, so if you don't want to answer, just tell me," Larisa said.

"I can't even begin to imagine a question you'd ask that I wouldn't answer!"

"Have you been to bed with a guy?" she asked.

I could think of at least a dozen silly responses and several outrageous ones, but Larisa's tone and her body language made it clear that would be a bad idea.

"Yes. Why?"

"Did it hurt, and did you bleed a lot?" Larisa asked.

"No, neither. Both of those claims are mostly BS. You play sports, right?"

"Soccer."

"And you ride a bike?"

"Yes."

"Then the chances that you have an intact hymen are pretty much zero. I mean, sure, you could, but it's not likely; as for pain, mostly that's because the girl isn't wet enough, which is very easy to solve. If your partner has experience, he'll know."

I knew, of course, who that would be, and there was no chance Jesse could be *that* clueless given he'd had sex with at least thirty girls and probably more, and most of them were probably virgins.

"Why do people say it if it's not true?"

"Why do people say anything dumb?" I asked. "But, it is possible, and if you do have an intact hymen, you could bleed a little bit, and I mean very little, and it might hurt for a second or two, but then it will feel so good you won't care! Don't rush, make sure you won't be interrupted, and let your partner guide you. You really should start taking birth control pills because then you don't have to worry about rubbers or some other method, and you absolutely have to have an STD test."

"Why? If I never went to bed with a guy, how could I have a disease?"

"Medical procedures, blood transfusions, or, and I'm sure this isn't true for you, IV drug use. But even if you haven't had those, some people have rules that require all their partners to have a test. I do because that's something my dad and moms insist on. It ensures that everyone is safe. Everyone in our family has that

rule. The clinic where you get your birth control pills will probably suggest one, and they can do it. It takes a few days to get the results."

Which meant Jesse wasn't going to have her in his bed this weekend.

"What's it like?" she asked.

"It will be the most exhilarating thing you've ever done! And don't worry, because if you have an experienced partner, they'll lead you. I mean, it's really obvious if you think about the difference between boys and girls, and trust me, your body will know what to do to make it feel really good!"

"OK, but everyone says guys like girls to use their mouth..."

"That's pretty simple, too. Use your lips and tongue, and don't bite!"

Larisa laughed softly, "Ouch!"

"Yeah," I smirked. "Then use your other hand to stroke while you use your mouth. Until you get used to it, don't take him too far in your mouth, and just keep the head in when he cums. Suck and use your tongue, then swallow. It's not a lot, maybe a teaspoon or two."

"You don't think it's gross? I hear some girls say that."

"No. It's really sexy, and it makes the guy feel really good. You want the guy to use his tongue on you, too, because that feels awesome. For some girls, it feels better than intercourse. And what's really fun is using your mouths at the same time."

"At the same time?"

"It's called sixty-nine. You straddle the guy's face so he can lick you while you suck him. There's other stuff you can do, too. You should read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*. I can give you a copy, but you probably don't want your dad to see it."

"According to my dad, I'm not allowed to kiss!"

"It's literally none of his business if you want to do stuff with boys. Just make sure the boy knows the limits, and don't let him do more than you want to do. Have you talked to your mom?"

"Some. She gave me permission to have two kisses -- one to greet and one to depart."

I couldn't help myself but giggle at what I thought.

"What?" Larisa asked.

"So don't kiss! You can do all the other stuff without kissing! I know a girl who had her first kiss *after* she lost her virginity and had sucked the guy!"

"No way!"

"I believe her. She basically snuck into the guy's room, got into bed naked with him, used her mouth, then had him inside her before she kissed him, and she'd never kissed anyone before."

"Wow!"

"So," I smirked, "you could tell your dad the truth! 'No kisses, Papa, just as you said'."

Larisa laughed, "It's too late because I already kissed someone!"

"I wasn't recommending it! I just said it was possible. You live near a college campus, right?"

"Not really; we live in Concord, but we're not far from the hospital."

"There will be a clinic, or you could even ask your gynecologist. They can't tell your parents anything."

"Thanks, Birgit."

"You're welcome! Shall we go back to the others?"

"Yes."

We left the study and I was positive Jesse was going to be very happy.

 Steve

"You were knocked out early tonight," Pete observed as we sipped bourbon and watched Jesse, Lieutenant Nomura, and Ben Jackson vie for chips at the final table of our usual Hold 'Em tournament.

"I bled chips, and when I finally had a hand, Aaron had a slightly better one, then promptly lost all his chips to Jesse on what had to be the bad beat of the night."

"A one-outer on the River is a tough beat. It's one of those rare occasions where luck matters. Aaron played it right, getting all his money in with far and away the best hand. He'll win that around 96% of the time. I'll take those odds."

"For sure."

"How is work?"

"I'm on a witness protection detail."

"I hope it goes better than with Markinson," I said with a grin.

"You do realize that *A Few Good Men* was not a documentary, right?"

I laughed, "Obviously. But you know I like to tweak you. I'd ask questions, but I know you can't answer, so I won't waste either of our time."

"Good man. How is NIKA?"

"Things are going well. I'm happy because I mostly get to sit in my office and write code with Penny."

"You've known her for almost twenty years now, right?"

"Yes, She stuck her head over the fence, said 'hello', and the rest is, as they say, history."

"That wasn't long after you bought the house, right?"

"We moved in May of '83, and Penny popped her head over the fence in August of that year."

"It's hard to believe we met in '78," Pete said. "Twenty-five years."

"That's longer than most prison sentences!" I chuckled.

Pete laughed, "What was the Kenny Rogers song about the life sentence?"

"*Long Arm of the Law*," I replied. "And we're talking about Melanie, better you than me!"

Pete laughed again, "I know you don't believe that! You and Mel always had a very special thing."

"We did, and we do, but you're who she needed. And my life went a VERY different way."

"That's for sure!" Pete declared. "Traveling soon?"

"Arizona tomorrow afternoon for a few days, then the Netherlands at the end of the month. Well, and my regular visit to Mayo Clinic in about ten days."

"Any changes?"

"No. There's a new area of investigation, but as with everything else, it's really looking at symptoms because almost everyone is sure it's a problem with my hypothalamus and hormone regulation. Most likely, it's congenital; fortunately, we haven't seen any symptoms in any of the kids."

Ben was knocked out and came to stand with us.

"No mercy, despite arranging the Jobu figurine for Jesse's team!" Ben said, shaking his head.

"The chance that any Adams, Block, or Clarke family member is going to give you a break on anything is near zero!" Pete declared.

"I know I've said this before," Ben replied, "but Jesse is more mature at seventeen than I was when I started law school."

"Sixteen for another three weeks," I corrected.

"Pedantic as always!" Pete replied.

"I'm talking to a lawyer and a LEO! Not being precise is a sure way to land in a world of hurt!"

"Ben, how long have you known Steve?" Pete asked.

"Seventeen years, I think it is," Ben replied.

May 6, 1986," I replied. "Julia and I met Ben that day in Los Angeles. I remember the date because it was such an important meeting in NIKA's history."

"Dad," Jesse called out.

"Yes?"

"Can we put up the 'No Girls Allowed' sign again?"

I laughed, "Trouble?"

"He's in trouble, alright!" Lieutenant Nomura declared. "He needs runner-runner Jacks to beat me."

And they didn't come, which wasn't a surprise given the very long odds of roughly 0.1%.

"Jesse," I began with a grin.

"DON'T SAY IT, PENGUIN!" he growled.

"Does she look like a woman beaten by Jacks?" I asked.

Everyone laughed because they knew the reference from *Rounders*. With the tourney over, I headed to the basement to play pool with some of the guys.



February 2, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"When is your next game?" Larisa asked as we ate breakfast in the coach house on Sunday morning.

"Next weekend. We play Oak Park on Saturday, and the winner of the game between Glencoe and Joliet Catholic on Sunday."

"Oak Park is the team with your friend and his girlfriend, right?"

"Yes."

"Then what?"

"The state tournament. Eight teams from the various regions, single elimination. What time are you leaving for the airport?"

"A car will pick us up at about 2:00pm. Is it OK if I ask to visit during Spring Break?"

"It is, but my moms will be on a cruise, and my dad and Aunt Kara will be in Saint Martin. Suzanne and Aunt Jessica will be here. I'm not sure if your parents will be comfortable with that."

"I'll talk to Mom. Would I be able to use a room in the main house?"

"I'm sure that would be OK. Birgit is going to Saint Martin, and I'm positive she'd let you sleep in her room. Just ask her. And let me know what your mom says. If you can't come here, I'm sure I could visit you."

"I'd rather come here," Larisa said.

I wondered if that was what she had meant by 'soon' when we'd been kissing. We finished our breakfast, and after we cleaned up the kitchen, we decided to use the sauna, though out of deference to General Dmitry, I wore bathing trunks, and Larisa looked absolutely gorgeous in her one-piece black bathing suit.

 Birgit

"Do you have a minute, Birgit?" Larisa asked late on Sunday morning.

"Sure! What's up?"

"I want to visit Jesse during Spring Break. Jesse says you'll be in Saint Martin, and I wondered if it would be OK to sleep in your room if I visit."

"Not Jesse's room?" I asked with a smirk.

"Oh, yes, a brilliant idea! 'Papa, I want to sleep in the same bed as Jesse'. Just what do you think my dad would say?"

"He might park a tank on top of Jesse!" I giggled.

"He's an awesome dad, but he has his own ideas, and I have mine!"

"You need a dad like mine!" I declared.

"Mom says your dad is VERY «некультурный» (*nekulturny*)! That means he doesn't behave like a gentleman."

"And your mom would know!" I tittered.

"So it would appear!" Larisa replied. "But I need to be able to truthfully tell my dad that I arranged to use your room."

"Yes, of course. I'll let my dad know, though he'll be gone too, so I'll make sure Mom and Suzanne both know."

"I thought your mom was going with your dad."

"The other mom! When I say 'my mom', I mean the one who had me. When I say 'Mom', I mean the other one."

"I like Jesse's idea of Mom One and Mom Two."

"Me, too! But he was here first, so he got to take those names! Anyway, I'll make sure there are clean sheets on the bed and that the spare sheets are washed in case you need them."

"Thanks, Birgit! I really appreciate it!"

"You're welcome."

 Ashley

"Seriously?! Does he EVER stop?!" Stephe exploded angrily.

"Who lit the fuse on your tampon?" I asked, totally annoyed with Stephe.

"Oh, please! How is this on ME? It's totally out of control!"

"No, it's not," I said calmly. "You need to chill and mind your own business."

"I swear, he'll do it with anyone!"

"No, he won't. But even if he did, it's none of your business! He absolutely did NOT do it with Birgit, no matter what you think. And you need to just drop this. Completely. I do not want to hear it. If you want to bitch, go bitch to one of your friends, but don't count on keeping your friends if all you do is bitch about something that is NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS."

"You want to fuck him, don't you?"

"Oh, for Loki's sake! I don't want to fuck *anyone*! I'm eleven! And I'm not Birgit! She couldn't wait to have her cherry popped, and I was pretty sure it would happen when she was thirteen! That's totally not me. You, on the other hand, planned to fuck Nicholas on your fourteenth birthday until you got your head up your butt and began acting like a total bitch. Just stop! In fact, go find Nicholas and demand he fuck you. Maybe THAT will chill you out."

"Oh, right, he cares more about video games than me, and I'm going to do that with him?"

I rolled my eyes in exasperation.

"That's SO not true! You demanded he give up his entire life to be your boyfriend. That's just wrong on EVERY level. He needs his friends, and he needs to be able to do stuff he likes, or he'll be miserable. And if you think your pussy is SO special, that's not the case, and you're terribly misguided!"

"Bitch!" Stephe growled, then stormed out of our room.

I sighed and went to find Kara Mom because my mom was working at the hospital. I found her in the Japanese room with Dad.

"Do you have a moment, Kara Mom?" I asked.

"I'll go pack for my trip," Dad said.

He left, closing the door behind him.

"Stephe is in a mood again," I said. "She had a hissy fit because she found out Dad is taking a girl with him to Arizona."

"And you tweaked her, didn't you?"

"I might have asked who lit the fuse on her tampon," I said with a smirk.

Kara Mom laughed, "You are a scamp, just as your dad says!"

"As I said, that is a factory-installed option! You can take it up with the manufacturer!"

"Further proving the point! Do you have a theory as to the problem?"

"She's upset about Nicholas. Until they get back together, she's going to be a bitch to everyone. What she *really* needs is to have her brains..."

"She's twelve," Mom interrupted.

"OK, fine, yes, but do we *really* want to deal with this for two or three more years? Even if she doesn't get laid, she won't chill until they're a couple again. And she *still* thinks he should give up his friends and stop playing video games to spend time with her. That's nuts and is a recipe for a failed relationship."

"Which you know from your extensive experience?" Kara Mom asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I think, and I know things!" I declared. "I'm an Adams, and I watch how you, Mom, Dad, and Suzanne conduct your relationship. Isn't the point of Guys' Night and Girls' Night Out to give the boys time to do boy things with their friends? And for girls to do girl things with their friends?"

"That is a very important part, yes."

"Stephie would refuse to allow Nicholas to participate. Chelsea doesn't do that with Matthew. In fact, she's cool with him playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with his friends. She gets it. So does Birgit. Stephie's thinking is messed up, and so is her worldview. And all because Nicholas wanted to spend some time with his friends rather than being Stephie's slave and lap dog!"

"Are you sure you're eleven?" Kara Mom asked.

"Well, word on the street is you were there when I was born, so you would know better than I would! I only have second-hand information and hearsay!"

"You are your father's daughter!"

"That's a good thing, right?" I asked impishly.

"Usually," Kara Mom replied with a soft laugh. "Where is your sister?"

"No clue. She stormed out of our room, and I came to find you."

"I'll see if I can talk to her. Would you please not try to wind her up?"

"I don't have to try," I replied. "She's wound so tight she's ready to explode at any moment."

"What plans did you have for today?"

"The stepsisters are going next door to Aunt Penny's house to hang out with Amber."

"Have fun!"

 Stephanie

"Hi," Mom said.

"Ashley," I said disgustedly.

"She's concerned about you. What's bothering you today?"

"Dad. He just needs to stop!"

"What makes you think you have the right to tell your dad what to do?"

"He's...never mind. You won't do anything about it because you let him do it."

"Why do you think you should control what he does? How did that work out with Nicholas?"

"He's an idiot!" I growled.

"Nicolas? Or your Dad?"

"Yes!"

"Well, teenage boys aren't known for their wisdom," Mom said. "But shouldn't he have the same freedom you do?"

"My boyfriend should do what I want!" I protested. "Not what he wants! I mean, am I supposed to be OK with my boyfriend fucking other girls?!"

"That depends on your agreement. You want something like what Matthew and Chelsea have or Albert and Jane. And guess what? You're free to do that, and nobody will complain. But I'll point out that neither Chelsea nor Jane try to control everything the boys do. Matthew hangs out with his friends and plays *Dungeons & Dragons*; Albert does his Scout activities and flies his simulator."

"Jane is in England! It's different!"

"And when she was here, he still did the things important to him and Jane supported him, just as Chelsea supports Matthew. Your dad supports me, Jessica, and Suzanne, in what we do, and we support him. Your dad is not doing anything that isn't part of our agreement."

"But why make that agreement?! It makes no sense!"

"You don't know the entire story," Mom said, "so I can see how you might think that. But Albert, Ashley, Matthew, Michael, and Jesse wouldn't be here if I'd insisted your dad be monogamous with me. But you know what? I suspect that would have meant neither you nor Birgit would be here, either, because of who your dad is. He's *always* had multiple girlfriends, with the first trio being Aunt Jennifer, Aunt Bethany, and Aunt Melanie. It's a bit more complicated, but that is how it started."

"Why would they do that?" I demanded.

"Do you think it was easy growing up lesbian in the 70s? Don't you think that might have affected how Aunt Jennifer approached having a boyfriend? And you read Aunt Bethany's book about sexual assault, right?"

"Yes," I admitted grudgingly because it made Dad out to be a hero.

"Your dad never lied to any of us, and in fact, I chased your dad because I wanted to have an affair with him."

"Why?"

"Because my dad was so controlling. When I was sixteen, I decided I was in charge of my body, not my dad, so I decided to have the school stud deflower me, have a brief, torrid affair, then get on with my life. Instead, we fell in love. We had some pretty bad times because I was still struggling with my belief in God, and we were apart for the best part of a year. When we reconciled, your dad was on the way to marrying Bethany, and I let him know I wanted to have babies with him and I didn't need to get married.

"Things with Bethany blew up because, well, you'll need to ask her. Dad had met Jessica earlier that year, and she proposed to *us*, suggesting that Dad could have

dalliances even after the wedding. Your dad and I agreed, and the three of us married. All of us had the freedom to decide who to have sex with. All of us."

"But you don't!" I protested.

"That's my choice. I have the *freedom* to do it. So does Jessica. She had an emotional affair with Jorge while she was estranged from us, and it would have been perfectly OK with both your dad and me if she had actually had sex with him."

"But why?"

"Because we each need something different from the marriage, and we each benefit from it. I like having sex with Jessica and Suzanne, and it fulfills a need I would have needed to be fulfilled even if your dad and I had simply married each other."

"Seriously? You wanted to be with girls?"

"Why is that so hard to believe? If I were going to use my freedom, it would be with a girl, not with a guy, well, unless it was with your dad and another girl. But I have Jessica and Suzanne, so I don't need to do that."

"I just don't get it!"

"Because it's not what you want or you think is the right thing to do." Mom said.
"And that's the core problem. What is good for you and what works for you won't work for everyone, and it's not your place to tell them they have to do what you want them to do."

"Dad will fuck anyone!" I declared.

"No, he won't. If you're worried about your friends, that will NOT happen because you don't want it to, no matter what else might be true. And there are rules, too, and he follows them. They were negotiated amongst the four of us when Suzanne joined us and had been negotiated by your dad, Jessica, and me when we first married. And they've evolved and changed over time."

"Right! He has three wives and two girlfriends, and he's taking a girl with him on his trip! Rules? Hah!"

"I can't make you believe anything, and you have your mind made up," Mom said. "So we'll leave it at that. The thing is, so long as you insist that your dad or Nicholas conform exactly to your demands, you're going to be frustrated and unhappy."

"Whatever," I said.

Mom walked away, and I went to the foyer, grabbed my jacket, and left the house, heading to Allison's house.

[Aboard an American Airlines Flight en route to Phoenix]

 Steve

"Do you always fly First Class?" Shaye asked as we boarded the plane. "I know you said your client is paying for this one."

"Nearly always," I replied. "I fly often enough that I have upgrades via my AAdvantage status. In addition, my company books enough flights on American that we have some complimentary upgrades as well."

"How about my ticket? You said something about it being complimentary."

"I fly enough, and my company almost exclusively uses American, so I can get a free companion ticket several times a year. All my expenses are covered by the investor."

The stewardess came by and offered us champagne or orange juice, and I asked for two glasses of champagne, which were served without any questions.

"Who is this guy, if you can say."

"A guy I met about fifteen years ago. His company and my company did business together, and it was very profitable. After he sold his company, he bought another company, which I ended up buying from him. He retired and, after traveling on his yacht, began investing. We've maintained a relationship, and given he's in South Africa at the moment, he's asking me to perform due diligence and act as his agent."

"South Africa?"

"He was dating Miss South Africa from the Miss Universe pageant. She got pregnant, so they decided to settle down in Johannesburg. I'm actually going to the Netherlands at the end of the month to check out a company for him."

"Oh, sure, I get the trip to Arizona! Who gets the trip to Europe?"

"Nobody! I'll meet up with some friends there."

"I take it you have friends all over the world?"

"From Japan to Russia to Sweden to the Netherlands."

"That's totally cool. If you need a traveling companion, all you have to do is ask!"

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied with a smile.

The stewardess collected our empty glasses and then participated in the safety briefing, which I knew by heart, including exactly how many rows there were from my seat to each exit door on the MD-80. As soon as the safety briefing was conducted, the plane pushed back from the gate, and we began our journey.

"How much have you flown?" I asked Shaye as we taxied.

"This is my third flight. The only other time was a flight to California to visit family. We drove to Florida for the stereotypical family Disney trip. The only thing missing was the Family Truckster; we drove a minivan instead."

"We drove to Florida for our family trip," I said. "Flying just didn't make sense, and two other families went with us."

"That must have been a heck of a trip with all those kids!"

"It was fun. My kids are really well-behaved and can take care of themselves."

"I doubt most kids that age could."

"Not because of the kids, but because of adults," I countered. "If you continually treat kids as if they were babies or toddlers, that's what they'll be for their entire childhood, if not their entire lives."

We reached the end of the runway, and after notification from the pilot, the plane accelerated down the runway and climbed into the air. Almost immediately, the plane banked to the left and the pilot pulled back on the throttles following the noise abatement procedures for O'Hare.

"Is that normal?" Shaye asked.

"Yes. People stupid enough to buy houses in the flight paths near the airport whined to politicians who imposed the rules."

"Wow!"

"What do you mean? If you do something stupid, the government should not bail you out. It's not like they didn't know the airport was here. Anyone who bought in the last thirty years has no right to complain, and I'm sure as heck not going to listen. Neither should the politicians. Let me ask this -- if your toddler is misbehaving in a store, do you think buying him a toy or candy to get him to behave is a good idea?"

"Probably not."

"Why?"

"Because you encourage the bad behavior by rewarding it."

"Quod erat demonstrandum."

"You mean because if politicians do things when people whine, they're encouraging them to whine in the future?"

"Yes. I'm not talking about people petitioning the government for changes in laws or policies, but in saying, in effect, 'I fucked up, and YOU have to fix it and force everyone else to pay for it via taxes'. I mean, seriously, why should the airlines be subjected to special rules and taxpayers pay for soundproofing because someone *chose* to buy or build a house in airport flight paths?"

"Accepting that argument for the moment, what about someone who has lived there since before World War II?"

"Then they would have a 'quiet enjoyment' tort against the airport, who would pay for any necessary modifications or simply buy the property from them, using funds collected from passengers and working with airlines to mitigate noise. That solves the problem and doesn't try to hold anyone accountable except the airport authority, who bear the responsibility.

"That applies to about 90% of laws and regulations which, in effect, impose tax burdens on people who are neither responsible nor involved. It's one thing to collect taxes for police and fire services; it's a very different thing to collect them to pay off someone who made a bad decision. It's the same with insurance companies settling lawsuits -- once they started doing that, they guaranteed MORE suits because people knew they'd be paid off to go away."

"But companies have so much money; how could that even work?"

"It's tough, but that's a problem now, as it is. That said, a way to stop nuisance suits is something called 'Loser pays'. The party who loses pays one hundred percent of the valid legal fees plus receives whatever remedies are available. That doesn't solve the entire problem, and it has some weaknesses, but it's a place to start. Similarly, malpractice suits should require *actual* malpractice or error, not just bad outcomes. If the medical professional followed the standard of care and wasn't negligent, then there should be no liability."

"I'm not sure about that. I mean, if someone dies during an operation, how is not the doctor's fault?"

"Talk to Jessica or her dad," I replied. "Or any medical professional. There are any number of reasons someone can die during a medical procedure that are not the doctor's fault and can't be foreseen. For example, some tiny percentage of people die from anesthesia, but there is no way to know until you put them under. The doctors can do everything perfectly, and the patient will still die. Remember --

those drugs are thoroughly tested and are approved by the FDA. Have you ever had surgery?"

"No."

"If you do, you sign an acknowledgment of the risks that expressly include death as a possible outcome. At that point, as I see it, and as tort law would have seen it in the past, the doctor is not responsible for anything that he could not foresee so long as he or she doesn't act negligently. But people don't see it that way, and, for example, the malpractice insurance for an OB/GYN in northern Illinois is now around six figures. Guess who pays those fees?"

"I was going to say insurance companies, but in the end, it's patients, right?"

"Yes, or taxpayers for people on Medicaid. The reason for those high rates is that everyone assumes that childbirth will be flawless, they'll have a perfectly healthy baby, and the mom will live. That is not guaranteed, even if everything goes perfectly. Jessica has a doctor friend whose wife died of an undetectable, inoperable blood vessel problem in her brain. Whose fault was that?"

"Undetectable?"

"With the technology available in 1987. Even today, we don't have a way of repairing it, though an MRI or CT scan could detect it. Should the doctor and hospital have been sued for that?"

"I guess not. Were they?"

"No, because my wife's friend understood that there was literally nothing the doctors could do. He was a medical student at the time, and she died the day she gave birth."

"Whoa!"

"Yeah. The baby survived, and she's fifteen or sixteen, as I don't know when her birthday is. Her dad remarried and has two girls by his wife and one with his lesbian friend from college."

"I sense a pattern!" Shaye declared. "Deanna's patron has a daughter with his lesbian friend; she's nineteen now, I think."

"I think Jessica's friend's was conceived by artificial insemination. Mine was the regular way."

"I don't know for sure, but I think her patron's was, too."

"You can use his name," I replied. "We agreed I know who it is."

"It's just safer not to."

"That does make sense."

We were interrupted when the stewardess came to ask us about drinks and our meal. The remainder of the flight was routine, and we deplaned in Phoenix about twenty minutes later than the scheduled arrival time.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Matt, what's the plan for the race in North Carolina?"

"Eduardo will pick me up at school; we'll come here and go straight to Meigs. Mr. Shaughnessy, Aimee's dad, will fly us to Richmond County Airport. The race is on Sunday, and he'll fly us back to Meigs."

"How did you manage that?"

"Dad spoke to Katy Anisimov about something, and she mentioned that Mr. Shaughnessy was going to the race and flying there. Dad asked if he'd consider making a detour and taking us so that neither of us had to miss classes on Monday. I'm not sure what kind of deal they worked out, but I'm not going to object!"

"Me, either! Is anyone else going?"

"Albert is going to sit in the right-hand seat and fly at least part of the way."

"On second thought..." Chelsea said with a silly smile.

"Right, because Albert is reckless, careless, and impetuous!"

"True. He's not Birgit!"

"NOBODY is Birgit!" I said, shaking my head. "I love my sister dearly, but she's a lot to handle."

"I bet!" Chelsea smirked.

"I do not want to even THINK about that!" I said, shaking my head. "My interest in that part of my sister's life is lower than zero!"

"What about OUR sex life?"

"There is nothing that interests me more!" I declared.

"Not drama? Not D&D?"

"D&D is fun, but unlike Michael, I prefer girls to games!"

"He's only thirteen! I bet that changes soon enough, especially if Andi has her way!"

"Probably."

"Drama?" Chelsea asked with a sly smile.

"Two very different needs and two things which are important parts of my life. I wouldn't be me without you and without drama."

"Smooth answer!"

"I try!"

"You know I was teasing you. Anyway, what's the scoop in North Carolina?"

"We'll hang out with Jason, Abbie, and the kids. He doesn't have to work on Saturday because the main car and backup car are at the track and they're on schedule for building the other cars."

"I always thought they had just one car and a backup."

"That used to be the case; now they have different chassis for short tracks, superspeedways, and road courses. When Dad went to his first race in Riverside, California, some of the cars were brought to the track on simple trailers."

"When was that?"

"1969," I replied.

"Wow! That was before Mom married Jim McGrath!"

"Dad was six, so your mom would have been around fifteen or sixteen. Before I forget, did you want to go to USC for Colin's graduation?"

"Mom and Dad invited me, so I'd like to, but only if we could go together."

"I don't see why not. I'll talk to Dad about tickets. I'm positive Mom will be OK with it. Are you ready for bed?"

"With you? Always!"

[Phoenix, Arizona]

 Steve

Shaye and I made our way to the arrivals hall and looked for a driver with a placard with my name. Spotting him, I smiled and led Shaye to him.

"Hi, Javier," I said. "This is my friend, Shaye."

"Hi, Mr. Adams. Nice to meet you, Shaye."

"Steve, please," I said.

"May I take your bags?"

I handed him my suit bag, but kept my laptop bag.

"Shaye?" I inquired.

She handed him her small suitcase.

"Lead the way, please," I said.

"The Hyatt near Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, right?"

"Same as last time! How is school going?"

"Good. Just over a year from now, I'll be ready to take advantage of your offer."

"Just call, and I'll put you in touch with Terry Penfield. He used to work for me, but now he's CIO for a financial services firm that is seriously into high-performance computing. If you'd rather make less money and work on supercomputers, I'll put you in touch with one of our Board members who runs the supercomputing lab at Uofl."

"Not to sound mercenary, but I'm interested in making money!"

"Me, too!"

We reached his car, he put our bags in the trunk and held the doors for us to get in. A minute later, we were on our way to the hotel in Tempe.

XXVI. Psychosexual?

February 2, 2003, Tempe, Arizona

 Steve

"Hi, CeCe," I said when Shaye and I walked up to the hostess stand at the hotel restaurant after checking into our room.

"Two?" she asked.

"Yes, please. How are you doing?"

She led us toward a booth.

"Great! Have a nice meal."

"Thanks."

She walked away, and a waiter came over to take our drink orders. I thought about trying to order wine but decided not to risk it.

"A girlfriend?" Shaye asked.

"My eldest son's ex-girlfriend," I replied. "She's a Freshman at Arizona State and plays on their NCAA softball team."

"When did they break up?"

"Just after she graduated from High School, so last Summer."

"If I remember correctly, he's a Junior."

"You do remember correctly, and yes, he was dating a Senior as a Sophomore."

"Like father, like son?" Shaye asked.

"I make a point of not interfering in my kids' sex lives, so I can't say exactly."

"Daughters, too?"

"Yes, of course. No double standards. If my daughter wants to have overnight guests, that's her business."

"She's fourteen?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I ever met a dad as mellow as you are! My friends' dads were all overprotective like my dad."

"And did that stop you and your friends from fucking as teenagers?"

"Heck no!"

"So, if it can't be controlled, what's the *correct* approach?"

"Education and advice."

"Bingo."

"Mind if I use the ladies'?"

"I'd rather you did that than make a mess on the seat and floor!"

Shaye laughed, rolled her eyes, got up, and headed for the restroom. I wasn't surprised when CeCe came over to the booth.

"I can see why you didn't call!"

"I'd apologize, but I don't think you'd believe me!"

"When will you be back?"

"May, most likely."

"Travel alone and call me, please!"

"I will."

"Have fun!"

"Thanks."

She walked away and was back at the hostess stand before Shaye returned. Shaye and I had a nice dinner, and I didn't see Shelly, the waitress who had propositioned me on my previous trip. After dinner, we headed up to the room, and I asked Shaye if she wanted anything to drink.

"Minibar?" she asked.

"Dante is paying," I replied. "But only one."

"Why?"

"Consent," I replied.

"That's seriously cautious."

"Given my circumstances, I have to be."

"Vodka and OJ if you can make it."

"One screwdriver coming up," I said.

I retrieved the small bottle of vodka, a bottle of OJ, and a bottle of Maker's Mark from the fridge and made our drinks, adding ice to Shaye's while I had my bourbon neat.

"You're very patient," Shaye said.

"Why rush things? I'm enjoying getting to know you and spending time with you. That's key if we're going to have a patronage relationship. If you just want it to be about sex, then it'll just be about sex. If you want a patron, then have a drink with me. I promise it'll be worth the wait."

"You're that sure of yourself?"

"YOU are that sure!" I countered. "I mean, seriously, did you come here expecting to have great sex or lousy sex?"

"Great, obviously."

"So if you're sure, why ask if I'm sure?" I asked with a grin.

"What do you like?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you!"

"What's your kink?" Shaye asked.

"Long, slow, gentle missionary position, or what's called the 'lotus position'."

"I'm not up on the *Kama Sutra*."

"The guy sits cross-legged, and the girl sits in his lap with her legs around him."

"That's more like an anti-kink!" Shaye declared.

"It is, but it's also true."

"I believe it, but that's not the norm for rich, powerful men."

"I've never claimed to be normal!"

"What else do you like?" Shaye asked.

"I love to eat pussy, and my goal with any sexual encounter is to provide maximum pleasure for my partner."

"So it's not about you? At all?"

"Of course it is!" I chuckled. "I get off on pleasing girls! Orgasms are only part of great sex."

"I think I'm beginning to understand why you're patient -- this is all foreplay!"

"Very perceptive! I also like to cuddle between rounds."

"This is not at all what I expected! Reports from my friends are that guys in college and rich guys all think good sex is like porn."

"Porn is ridiculous," I said, shaking my head. "I've seen a few classic movies, and it's only gotten worse."

"Have you done anything extreme?" Shaye asked.

"By whose standards?" I asked. "Some people would consider group sex with my wives to be extreme; I obviously don't."

"Anal?"

"Yes; both giving and receiving."

"You're bi?!" Shaye asked in surprise.

I laughed, "No."

"Dildo and harness?"

"Yes."

"Do you like that?"

"Giving and receiving both fall under 'providing maximum pleasure'."

"Bondage?"

"Yes, and the same."

"Food play?"

"Yes. Making body-part sundaes is very enjoyable because I like giving and receiving oral."

"Pain?"

"Floggers, but lightly, and that's in the 'provide maximum pleasure' category."

"I'm going to guess nothing beyond those."

"The Mile-High Club. Sauna sex."

"Have you earned your red wings?" Shaye asked.

"Yes. I think the most extreme thing was when a girl rode me after putting a vibrator in my butt and a dildo in my mouth."

"You're submissive?"

"That has been said, but may I point out that ensuring girls receive maximum pleasure results in both repeat customers and new customers from word of mouth?"

"How many total partners have you had?"

"Over two hundred."

"And three-fourths of those were virgins?"

"Yes. As I said, word of mouth worked to my advantage. If I have a fetish, it's teenage virgins, but society objects to teens controlling their own sexuality."

"TELL me about it! That was my biggest concern when I was with the college guy when I was fifteen. Illinois insisted I couldn't consent, but that's total bullshit."

"Technically, the law didn't make it illegal for you to have sex; it made it illegal for anyone over eighteen to have sex with you."

"It works out the same! I mean, I wanted a guy with significant experience to be my first, and that precludes most High School boys."

"Done with your drink?"

"I am!"

"Then why are you still wearing your clothes?" I asked.

Shaye laughed and quickly stripped off her clothes, revealing a svelte body with small breasts, plenty of freckles, and a neatly trimmed V of pubic hair. She looked expectantly at me, and I quickly undressed. Shaye smiled and nodded approvingly. I took her hand and led her into the bedroom.



February 3, 2003, Tempe, Arizona

 Steve

"Last night was awesome," Shaye declared. "And I'm really enjoying the shower!"

"Me, too!" I agreed.

We had spent four hours exploring each other's bodies, which had included both my preferences and Shaye's -- missionary, adulting, sixty-nine, cowgirl, and a headboard-banging fuck.

"Your hands are so gentle," she said with a contented sigh.

I put the bar of soap on the shelf and moved one hand to her small breast and the other to her mons and began massaging her clitoral hood while gently tweaking her nipple and kissing her neck.

"Yeah," she sighed. "Like that."

A few minutes later, Shaye shuddered and had an orgasm. When it passed, she turned, kissed me, then lowered herself to her knees and took me into her mouth. She was talented and took her time, doing everything she could to delay my orgasm. That, of course, made it even more intense, and I groaned in extreme pleasure when she finally allowed me to cum. She swallowed, then stood up to kiss me.

"That was awesome," I said. "Unfortunately, we need to finish our shower so we can have breakfast and I can get to my meeting. We'll have plenty of time together this afternoon and this evening."

Shaye quickly washed my body, and after rinsing off, we got out of the shower. We dried, dressed, then headed to the hotel restaurant to have breakfast. After breakfast, Shaye went back to our room while I headed to the GlucoTech offices.

"Hi, Mr. Adams!" Serenity, the cute brunette receptionist, said when I walked in.

"Good morning!" I replied.

"John and Amelia are expecting you. You can go through to the conference room and I'll let them know. There is a fresh pot of coffee there."

"Thanks!"

I walked past reception, down a corridor, turned left, and then entered the conference room. I poured myself a cup of coffee, and a few seconds later, John and Amelia came into the room. We greeted each other and chatted while waiting for their attorney, who was ushered in by Serenity about five minutes later.

There were no complications, and the contracts had been vetted by Dante's attorneys as well as Jacob Goldberg, SKJ's attorney. I signed the contracts on Dante's behalf, then called Goldman Sachs to arrange for the wire transfer. All of that accomplished, GlucoTech's attorney left and John and Amelia gave a status report. Once that was completed. I asked for privacy and called Dante to fill him in.

"Everything is complete," I said. "The contracts are signed, and the wire transfer initiated."

"Excellent! Is everything set for your trip to the Netherlands?"

"Yes."

"Good. I decided to pass completely on CSN Stores in Boston, so you can remove that from your list. I have a few other things I'm looking into; I'll let you know if they pan out."

"Domestic or international?"

"Domestic."

"OK. I'll speak to you before I meet with the Dutch company."

"Sounds good. I'll be in the States in May. Let's have dinner."

"I'd like that. Let me know the dates."

"The 8th through the 13th. I'll let you know my schedule; any chance you could come to New York? I don't need to come to Chicago, but I will if you can't get to New York."

"I can do that," I said. "Just let me know which day. I can meet with clients and our remote staff in the City on the same trip."

"Sounds good."

We said 'goodbye', and I ended the call. Jack invited me for a celebratory dinner, and I accepted, letting him know I'd have a companion with me. I was just about to walk to John's office when my Blackberry vibrated. I checked the message, then placed a call.

"Hey, Squirt! What's up?"

"Egon Zehnder is planning a significant upgrade to their database systems. They asked for you personally."

"South America, right?"

"Yes. Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil, as before, plus Chile and Mexico. But also the three Canadian offices -- Toronto, Montréal, and the new Calgary office. And obviously, the centralized US server here in Chicago."

"What happened to their IT director who was maintaining everything?"

"Let go following 9-11 when they had their serious business downturn. We've been doing their local IT support in the US, and everything else is handled out of London."

"Eduardo never mentioned that, but I haven't been involved with that kind of thing for over two years. When do they need this completed?"

"By the end of September."

"Did you speak to Dave? That amount of travel is going to really cut into the amount of coding time I have."

"Dave was unhappy, but the revenue is extremely lucrative so it's hard to argue against, especially given how productive you are. It's also the case that we're at a point in the development cycle where it will have less of an effect. I did offer him additional headcount, which we can afford."

"How many?"

"Two. One would be entry-level, and one would be senior. He hasn't had a headcount increase in fourteen months."

"That's your bailiwick," I replied. "I'm willing to do it if it makes business sense."

"They're a good customer and willing to pay the higher rate we charge for a Principal Engineer who is a NIKA Fellow."

"Then I'm in. Kimmy has my schedules -- both work and personal. Who do I need to speak to?"

"Kai Lindholst asked that you speak to Karl Aavik; he took over coördinating IT when they let the director go."

I chuckled, "My pseudo father-in-law. I'll call him once I'm back in Chicago."

"OK. I'll let him know that you'll take on the project and will be in touch."

"Thanks."

I ended the call, then went to John's office to let him know I was leaving. We chatted for a bit and agreed to meet at 6:00pm for dinner at a local steakhouse. We shook hands, then I left his office and asked Serenity to call a cab for me, which she did. Twenty minutes later, I was in the hotel room with Shaye.

"We have dinner at 6:00pm with the folks from GlucoTech. There's a Mexican restaurant not far from here where we can have lunch, if you're up for that."

"Sounds good!"



February 4, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Tuesday, Shaye and I flew back to Chicago after an enjoyable afternoon, dinner with the GlucoTech team, and then another four-hour lovemaking session.

"So, what do you think?" she asked as I drove towards her dorm.

"I'm amenable," I said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Interesting approach," Shaye said.

"One of us has to make the first proposal."

"I have three more years of school," she replied. "So a monthly stipend, and when I graduate, something similar to what Deanna has - a stipend plus studio space. In exchange, you have first dibs on my artwork, and we have sex on whatever frequency you want."

"I'd actually prefer that not be part of the agreement for two reasons -- it's not a *quid pro quo* and it could never be memorialized in a contract."

Shaye laughed, "Yes, your honor, she breached the contract by not blowing me often enough!"

"That would land ME in prison! The only way you can actually agree contractually to have sex is if you're making porn. And even then, the court would never order specific performance and would instead assign monetary damages, if there were any."

"What? A court won't order someone to fuck?" Shaye tittered.

"Nope. Then again, you *can* use refusal to have sex as grounds for divorce. In any event, as I said before we went to Arizona, the relationship doesn't depend on sex. One thing I'd like to do is see Deanna's setup."

"Ateljé D is at 618 South Wabash Avenue."

"Did Deanna spend time in Sweden?" I asked.

"Not that I know of; why?"

"'Ateljé' is a Swedish word for an art studio or similar. Some Swedish friends of mine ran a photography studio called Ateljé Cool. I've never seen that word used in any other context."

"You'll have to ask her! I never did. I assumed it was French."

"It does seem as if it would be. OK. I'll give her a call and check out her studio. How does \$500 a month sound to start?"

"That would be tax-free, right?"

"Yes. It'll be a gift."

"Awesome, because that's enough for me to stop working at West Loop Café, which will free up about twenty hours a week."

"For now, we won't need any kind of written agreement; once you have a studio, we will because there will be business concerns, including liability insurance and things like that."

"It's OK to continue to come to Philosophy Club, right?"

"Absolutely! I want you there."

"Cool!"

I dropped her at her dorm in the Loop, then headed home, where I was greeted by a certain daughter who had missed two days of cuddle time. As was normal, she took my bag so she could put the dirty clothes in the washer, and I went to see Jessica, who was reviewing charts in the Indian room.

"Having fun, Babe?" I asked.

"It's not quite as bad as grading Freshman papers, but close! How was Arizona?"

"Everything is set, the contracts are signed, and the money transferred. Now we just wait for our cut!"

"And your companion?"

"Another satisfied customer!"

"When's the last time the girl *wasn't* satisfied?"

"I could say never because they always have orgasms, but there are some who were disappointed at the way the relationship turned out. Stephanie called while I was in Tempe and said Eduardo's firm wants me to travel to South America and Canada to perform some major system upgrades. They want it completed by the end of September."

"Colombia again?"

"Yes. But I had no trouble there. And I'll have the same security, I'm sure. I promise to be careful."

"Careful about what, Dad?" Birgit asked, coming up behind me.

"Traveling to Colombia for work."

"Isn't that super dangerous?"

"I was there three years ago, and I came back safe. I talked to you nearly every day on that trip! The only difference is, this time, I'll visit Santiago, Chile."

"During the Summer? I'll go!"

"Talk about asking for trouble!" Jessica teased.

"Hey!" Birgit protested.

"You're going to see Marcella and Katy."

"You're just no fun, Dad!"

"So Penny tells me all the time!" I replied.

I heard the doorbell ring, and as usual, Ashley scampered to answer it and called me. I saw the person, and I knew what it was before he opened his mouth; I just didn't know why.

"Stephen Adams?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You've been served. Will you sign?"

"Sure."

I scribbled my signature on the form, he left, and I closed the door. I opened the envelope and shook my head.

"Oh, this is going to be fun," I said.

"What, Dad?" Ashley asked.

"A civil suit for wrongful death."

"What?!"

"The girl who visited and who was murdered."

"How can they sue you?! You didn't kill her!"

"No, but they say I'm responsible. I agree with you, but I need to speak to an attorney. And I think I'm simply a target of opportunity. I'm not the true deep pockets here."

"Who?"

"A competitor to Samantha, who owns the building."

"Wait! He can be sued for that?" Ashley protested.

"Anyone can sue for anything," Birgit declared. "*Kramer vs. Kramer* wasn't a complete joke."

"The world is populated by idiots!" Ashley declared.

"TRUTH!" both Birgit and I declared at the same time.

I went to the Indian room and closed the door, much to my eldest daughter's annoyance.

"Nadia Granger's parents are suing me, the cab company, and Jonathan Kane for wrongful death."

"What?!" Jessica asked in surprise.

"The cab company and I aren't the real targets; Jonathan Kane is. He's worth at least \$250 million. The goal will be to get the cab company to settle, then me, and then use those to pressure Jonathan to settle. I need to call Mike Knox and get someone from McCarthy/Jenkins to file an appearance and get in touch with whoever will represent Jonathan Kane. The cab company is probably a lost cause because their insurance will settle."

"Won't ours insist on the same thing?"

"I'll have Mike or whoever offer that we'll forego insurance if Jonathan Kane indemnifies us. It'll be worth it to him because then I won't be forced into a settlement. Heck, he could even buy the cab company if he wanted to and stop them from settling! Let me make the call."

I went to my office and dialed the offices of McCarthy/Jenkins in Naperville and was transferred to Mike's assistant who put me through to him.

"Send me a copy, please," he said once I told him. "But what's the gist?"

"That by enticing her to visit, I created the conditions that led to her murder, even if I didn't actually have anything to do with it. You can get details from Julius. But I coöperated fully with the police, and I paid the cabbie to take her to Union Station. The cabbie's statement confirms that and that she directed him, unbidden, to an address in Lincoln Park."

"OK. I'll speak to Julius."

"I'll scan the complaint and email you a PDF in a few minutes and courier the originals to you in the morning."

"I'm sure I don't have to remind you not to speak to anyone who is party to the case without an attorney present."

"Thank you for the non-reminder reminder!" I said.

Mike laughed, "One of us will file an appearance tomorrow afternoon, and at that point, all communication will come to us."

"Sounds good."

I ended the call, then turned on my Mac and the scanner. I scanned the document and sent the resulting PDF to Mike via email. That accomplished, I went back to the Indian room where Kara and Suzanne had joined Jessica. I explained what had happened, and after answering the questions I could, I went back to my study to answer email from work before dinner. Just before 6:00pm, my phone rang.

"Steve Adams," I said.

"Jonathan Kane. Do you have a moment?"

"My attorney advised me not to speak to anyone involved in the suit."

"Mine, too. Samantha says you're not a rule follower."

"Samantha Spurgeon talks too much, like so many other women I know!"

Jonathan laughed, "I know how that works! The mother of my daughter is the same, as is my long-term partner. I hope you're inclined to fight, not settle."

"I am, though I'm concerned about the cab company, not to mention the strong likelihood my liability carrier will insist I settle and could even force a settlement if it's less than their exposure."

"Ask."

"I'd need you to indemnify me against any losses if I waive insurance coverage."

"Easily done. We both know who the real target is here; no disrespect to your achievements."

"None taken! What about the cab company?"

"A tougher nut to crack," Jonathan said.

"Buy them. Or have Samantha buy them. Or front me the money, and I'll buy them."

"You think the way Samantha does!"

"She's implied you have a different approach to the business than her dad did."

"A matter of client selection and investment choices. In any event, I need to have my attorney speak with your attorney."

"It'll be someone at McCarthy/Jenkins, a Pittsburgh-based firm with offices in Naperville, most likely Mike Knox. Who's your attorney?"

"Nelson Boyd at Boyd, King, and Associates."

"One of the few attorneys at Hart-Lincoln who wasn't mobbed up."

"They were your clients, right?"

"Yes. We have a few other things in common. Did Deanna Haight mention we met?"

"She did, and I hadn't decided what to do given the complicated relationships."

"I practice «omertà» better than any Mafioso you can point to. But I know you have to be careful. Let's find a way to work together once this lawsuit is resolved."

"My attorney will be in touch with yours, and we'll take it from there. Thanks."

"Thank you."

We ended the call, and I fired off a quick email to Mike Knox, letting him know that Jonathan Kane had contacted me and provided the attorney information. Legally, I felt Nadia's parents had a tough claim to make; unfortunately, juries were often sympathetic, and if we couldn't win a dismissal in advance of a trial, it would be a crapshoot. Ultimately, though, I was going to be safe against a money judgment, but the last thing I wanted was to be found liable for a death.



February 5, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Do you EVER follow instructions?" Mike Knox asked when he called late afternoon on Wednesday.

"We didn't discuss any details of the case, only exchanged lawyer information and agreed neither of us wanted to settle. All true, and there is no way Jonathan Kane is going to screw me over."

"How can you know that?"

"I know far more about him than you might think and more than will ever be made public. Confidential?"

"Yes."

"He's the one who found Samantha's dad."

"OK, that came out of left field!"

"He and Samantha were friends when he worked for her dad, or at least as friendly as an adult can be with a pre-teen without it being the creepy uncle kind of relationship."

"Do you know about the offer of indemnification?"

"Yes. He asked me not to settle, and I said I'd need that if he wanted me to waive insurance coverage. He has at least twenty-five times as much to lose, not to mention his entire business depends on his reputation. Mine no longer does, at least with regard to the majority of our clients."

"I spoke with Nelson Boyd, his attorney, and we're going to have a strategy meeting before we speak with the cab company."

"OK. Jonathan and I won't speak again before you and his attorney speak. He and I are on the same side here."

"You can't count on that."

"I know you have to say that, Mike, but his fate and my fate are bound together, and he has far more to lose. Just hear them out and give me your best advice."

"I will. Nelson Boyd and I are meeting tomorrow afternoon. I'll call you afterwards."

"I know nothing is likely to happen next week, but I'll be at Mayo Monday and Tuesday of next week. I will have my BlackBerry, so just call Kimmy, and she'll get me a message."

"Will do."

After I hung up, I checked CNN's website to see what Secretary of State Colin Powell had said at the UN. He asserted that Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons, that he had used them, and that he had no compunction about using them in the future, both against other countries and against his own people.

"We're going to war, for sure," I said.

"Do you believe they have evidence of weapons of mass destruction?" Penny asked.

"Powell appears to have used that term over a dozen times in his speech, so, actually, no, I don't."

"Wait! What?!"

"If you have evidence, you show it, say it once or twice, then let the evidence speak for itself. If you *don't* have it, you say it over and over to make that what everyone remembers."

"That's warped!"

"I know how politicians act and speak, and despite being Secretary of State, he's a politician. He had CIA Director Tenet sitting right behind him. Do you trust the CIA? And it's not like Bush the Lesser's dad was CIA Director or anything."

"I know you don't go in for conspiracy theories, so you really believe he's lying?"

"Like a rug! It's smoke and mirrors. And do you know why?"

"Wait, I know this one! The current President Bush has a personal vendetta against Saddam because Saddam put out a hit contract on his dad!"

"Bingo. The plot collapsed after the Kuwaiti government arrested sixteen people, including an Iraqi intelligence colonel who had over 500 pounds of explosives in his possession. The plan was to use a car bomb when Bush was in Kuwait after the First Gulf War."

"You're so sure there's going to be a second one?"

"Read what Colin Powell said and tell me that's not a message to Hussein that says 'Get ready! Here we come!' And I'll wager we're still going to be in Iraq when Ashley graduates from college."

"She's in sixth grade!"

"Want to make a wager?"

"No. Sadly, I think you're right. On the other hand, if the terms were right..."

"Not happening, Pretty Penny!"

"You're just no fun, Steve; no fun at all!"

When I left the office, instead of driving straight home, I went to Ateljé D to see Deanna Haight.

"Hi!" Deanna exclaimed when I walked into her combination gallery and studio.

"I thought I'd stop by and see your place. I was surprised at the name."

"Ateljé D? The word is..."

"Swedish," I interrupted.

"An erudite man!"

"Maybe, but I lived in Sweden for a year as an exchange student, and three friends of mine in Gothenburg started a photography studio called Ateljé Cool back in the early 80s."

"I did speak to Jonathan, but I'm not sure if he's going to contact you."

"He called last night, though it was because we have a common interest, not in response to my request. May I see your space?"

She gave me a tour of the space, which covered three floors. The first floor was a combination art store and gallery space, the second floor was all gallery space, and the third floor had three modest studios, plus a larger space used for art classes. Given the location, I had a rough idea of the rent, though it was possible that Jonathan owned the building.

"How long have you had this space?" I asked once the tour was completed.

"May of 1984," Deanna replied. "We only had the first floor then."

"That's a very interesting painting," I said, indicating a haunting abstract piece.
"Is it for sale?"

"No. It's called *Afterlife* and is probably my best work, but it's intensely personal, and I could never sell it."

"Someone you lost?"

"Yes, many years ago, but it's not my story to tell."

"I understand loss," I said. "And I have some intensely personal things that remind me of those I've lost, though not creations of my own. I think we have a number of people in common. Did you know Tom Quinn back in the day?"

"Yes, though we lost touch with him and his buddy Stuart when Tom and Maria divorced."

"Tom is married to a close friend from High School, and Stuart dated one of my friends from college who works for me now. I assume you knew Dustin Brady."

"Yes. That accident was so tragic, and his bitch of a half-sister and his parents froze all of us out because they refused to accept he was gay. You know how things were in the 70s and 80s, I'm sure."

"I do. I didn't really know Dustin; he took photos of my house for a layout in an architectural magazine. I met Tom and Stuart about ten years later. If you were a member of St. Andrew's I bet we knew many of the same people. Do you recall a war widow named Jennifer McGrath?"

"Absolutely. I was at her funeral and at her wed...wait! That was YOU!"

"Guilty as charged! I was an altar boy for the funeral."

"That I don't recall. But holy crap! I can't believe it! And at the reception, you had a gorgeous strawberry blonde with you."

"Jennifer Block, mother to my eldest son. She's married to a girl named Josie."

"Married?"

"Fuck the government and their opinion. Married."

"You sound like my friend and the mother to Jonathan's daughter, Bianca. She's been in a long-term relationship with the same woman since 1985."

"A bit earlier for Jennifer and Josie, but similar, and I'm guessing similar stories with regard to having a kid."

"It was complicated and not my story to tell."

"My life has similar complications! And I'm sure you know Samantha Spurgeon and I are close."

"You were at her dad's house when he was arrested, right?"

"Yes. Spurgeon's gang tried to recruit me to help him escape, but I was working with the FBI."

"You know the full story, right?"

"In nauseating detail. They're all serving time now because of the work your patron did to trace the money."

"Did you know Murray Matheson was his patron and mentor?"

"I know very little of Jonathan's story, though I've pieced together some things from what I've heard from various people over the years. I know you said it was intensely personal and not your story to tell, but this painting -- *Afterlife* -- has a Japanese motif, even though it's abstract."

"Very perceptive."

"Shaye didn't tell you about my office?"

"No."

"It's decorated in a Japanese style, complete with «tatami» mats and a mural of cherry blossoms."

"You really should discuss that with Jonathan when you have a chance. He's been intensely private since the blowup with Noel Spurgeon."

"I won't take up more of your time," I said. "I just wanted to scope this out to have an idea of what Shaye might want and to get the lay of the land."

Deanna laughed, "Should I take that as a double entendre?"

"That would be a bold claim!" I said with a grin.

"Maybe when I was twenty; life is VERY different at thirty-eight."

"Very true, though I don't feel my life is in any way worse than it was at twenty."

"I sure don't look like I'm twenty! You're the same age as Jonathan, and both of you could easily pass for thirty."

I didn't have the heart to tell her about Kara, who, at thirty-seven, was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever met.

"You are a beautiful woman," I said. "Anyway, I don't want to take more of your time, and I need to get home for dinner and karate."

"Shaye was very happy on Tuesday evening."

"Good to know! I was, as well. I'm sure we'll see each other soon."

"No doubt!" Deanna agreed.

I left Ateljé D, walked to my car, got in, and headed home. Twenty minutes later, I walked into the house.

"You had a call about ten minutes ago," Birgit said. "Anna Wilson in Cincinnati."

"Thanks, Pumpkin! How was your day?"

"Just another Wednesday! Dinner in ten minutes."

"OK."

I went to my study, put down my satchel, and picked up the phone. I checked my address book and dialed Anna's number. She answered on the third ring.

"Hi, it's Steve," I said. "Birgit said you called."

"Are you in town on Monday?"

"No. I'll be at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. Why?"

"That's so weird! I'll be in Rochester on Monday evening! Is this for your medical condition or something new?"

"Same old, same old," I replied. "They'll run every test they know and report that they still have no idea what's causing the problem. There's a new theory put forward by my doctor friend in Rutherford."

"Wait! Mike Loucks?"

"Yes."

"OK, this just gets weirder by the second!"

"That shouldn't surprise you! We are talking about me, after all!"

Anna laughed, "So true!"

"Why are you going to be in Rochester?"

"I'm bringing my friend Angie, who you met, for an EEG-MRI and some other tests. I was going to suggest we have lunch on Monday in Chicago, but maybe dinner in Rochester will work?"

That would work because I was having dinner with Don and Mary on Sunday evening and hadn't made any plans for Monday.

"It will. Let me give you my mobile number. Call when you arrive on Monday. How long are you staying?"

"Until Wednesday afternoon. You?"

"Until Tuesday evening. I'm also having an EEG-MRI. Where are you staying?"

"The Mariott," Anna replied.

"Me, too. I'll see you on Monday evening."

"I'll call when we arrive! Are you flying?"

"Yes, Sunday evening, then back Tuesday evening. Commercial."

"As opposed to?"

"A private plane. I have a friend with a corporate jet that I have occasional access to, but I like to save that for important or emergency use."

"You always did prefer sharing arrangements!" Anna teased.

"Very true! See you Monday."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up. I made a note in my calendar, then went to the dining room for dinner.

"Anna Wilson and her friend Angie are going to be in Rochester on Monday evening," I said. "Angie is having an EEG-MRI and some other tests. They both appear to know Mike Loucks."

"You don't know the story?" Jessica asked.

"No."

"Angie and Mike were very, very close in college until she received her diagnosis and became a ward of the State of Ohio."

"You just put some pieces together. Anna said that Angie had been close to marrying a guy in college but had to drop out. She also referred to a 'doctor friend' who helps Angie, but she's never given a name. The clue I should have had was when I found out Angie attends an Orthodox church in Loveland. Anyway, the three of us are going to have dinner on Monday night."

"You're having dinner with Mary and Don on Sunday, right?"

"Yes, and they invited Alejandra and Trent, Naomi and Greg, and Sonya."

"What tests are you having, Steve-sama?" Yuriko asked.

"An EEG-MRI, a nuclear cardiac stress test, and blood work. They're going to investigate my dopamine levels based on a suggestion by Doctor Mike Loucks. I'll also meet with Doctor Brown for a psychosexual evaluation."

"Heterosexual, homosexual, psychosexual!" Birgit tittered. "Yep. Dad's definitely 'psycho'! And according to our moms, very sexual!"

"Like you have ANY room to talk!" Ashley exclaimed. "Talk about 'psycho'!"

Birgit smirked, "I resemble that remark! And I take after my parents!"

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Ashley replied.

XXVII. Hip Check

February 6, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve, I have Mike Knox for you," Kimmy said over the intercom late on Thursday.

"Put him through, please."

A few seconds later, Mike was on the line.

"I had a good conversation with Nelson Boyd, Mr. Kane's attorney. I believe we're on the same page, and our interests align, at least as much as they can in such a case. I'm of the opinion that in an adversarial situation, he'd have an easier time shifting blame to you and the cab company than we would to him, as he was only a passive actor in what happened."

"I'm glad you agree with me," I replied lightly.

Mike laughed, "You know that what makes business sense may not always make legal sense, and vice versa, so you know I had to explore this from a legal point of view."

"Obviously, and I wanted your opinion, or I wouldn't have bothered you with it! What's the next step."

"Nelson Boyd, Ned Jenkins, and I will contact counsel for Windy City Taxi and get a feel for their position. Fundamentally, they're the ones with the biggest

potential exposure -- the cabbie altered the destination you specified and paid for. We don't yet know the drop-off point, but given she was under twenty-one, if it was a club, well, you get the picture."

"Wouldn't the police have checked?" I asked.

"Yes, but according to Julius, they held back almost all of the relevant information. They wouldn't even tell him the exact time she was dropped off, or the street, or even the type of area -- residential or commercial or mixed. I do know the location of the building where she was found because Nelson Boyd revealed it."

"They're usually less cagey and only hold back salient details like the condition of the body or anything that might point them to a suspect or be used to weed out false confessions. Any idea why?"

"Julius, Ned, and I put our heads together and speculate they really liked you or Mr. Kane, and were hoping you said something that hadn't been made public. They didn't even mention her online activities, which they usually do."

"She had another, more explicit conversation with some unknown party."

"That's my take. Julius pointed out that they're treating it as rape-murder when all evidence we know of points to consensual sex, during or after which she was killed. But we don't even know that -- if they are being deceptive about rape, maybe she died accidentally. I asked MC about it, and there are any number of things that might have happened during rough sex or bondage that might have led to her accidental death."

"As a Navy JAG, I would expect you had some experience in that area."

"One murder, a pair of what are colloquially called 'date rapes', and more marijuana or alcohol-related charges than you could shake a stick at. Everything else was your garden variety stupidity that occurs when you put teenagers in close proximity to each other with minimal supervision."

I chuckled, "So, like the Compound?"

"I had a number of cases of consensual sex that were UCMJ violations."

"Karl and Pete always referred to me as a walking, talking UCMJ violation!"

"They aren't wrong," Mike replied.

"No shit, Counselor! Let me know what Windy City Taxi's counsel has to say."

"Don't go trying to buy them, please. That might not look good if we do have to take this to a jury."

"I'll call Samantha and let her know to cancel the \$100 million loan."

"I hope you're joking!"

"I am, but she'd be good for it if I called and asked."

"I'm always amazed at things Brian or Howard say they've done that, even with my income and MCs, we couldn't afford to do!"

"Ditto. There's money, and then there's 'Fuck you!' money. Even with three incomes here, we don't have 'Fuck you!' money! Not that it did Noel Spurgeon any good."

"Videotaping yourself committing felony sexual assault is not a good look. Not to mention the child pornography charges for every video."

"I have a teenage daughter who will strenuously object to both those characterizations!"

"Birgit is not normal!"

"No kidding," I said dryly. "But I've explained to her the ramifications of not following the law, mostly to the guy, not her, obviously. Anyway, let me know, and I'll hold fire until we know more."

"Good. We don't want a formal agreement with Mr. Kane except to cooperate on defense at this stage. We'll do our best to make it all go away with motions to dismiss."

"Thanks, Mike."

"You're welcome. Is Liz up to speed?"

"Yes. I'll fill her in on our convo. I'm intentionally keeping her at arm's length on this one, as I don't want any NIKA involvement."

"Out of curiosity, what device did you use to contact her?"

"My personal Mac laptop that I bought with my own funds. I have to mostly use a Windows machine for development at work. I also used my private mobile phone, not my BlackBerry. So, to get at NIKA assets, they'll have to pierce the LLC, of which I'm only one of the three general partners, and I'm actually no longer managing partner -- that's Jessica. It'll be Suzanne when we make her a general partner once she earns her law degree, and she'll become managing partner."

"That's a lot of trust."

"No more than in a marriage," I replied. "Think about the high-profile divorces, especially Craig McCaw and Wendy Petrak, where after litigation, she ended up with something like half a billion in Nextel stock. Or Rupert Murdoch and Anna Torv, where she walked away with something like \$1.7 billion. Or the Wildenstein's, where she received nearly \$4 billion. Amy Irving only ended up with a hundred mil in her divorce from Steven Spielberg."

"How did you just reel those off?" Mike asked.

"Samantha and I had conversations about the risks of not having a prenup, and Gwen Meyer provided some examples. Other's just from being on Usenet."

"I was surprised Samantha didn't ask Brian for a prenup."

"Her attorney strongly advised it, but she felt it was insulting and asked me if I would have signed one. I wouldn't have, but by the time Samantha and I met, I was already married, so the point was moot. Jess, Kara, Suzanne, and I all signed papers about custody, powers of attorney, and so on to mimic the rights granted by marriage, but there were no breakup provisions because I was singularly uninterested in any."

"Illinois doesn't have separate maintenance; did you make any provisions?"

"Only testamentary to ensure that Kara and Suzanne share in my estate and that all the kids are treated equally, no matter which mom they have. I have similar papers with Jen and Josie that cover Jesse. Gwen drew everything up over the years, and now it's all handled by Becka Scott-Potter, the attorney to whom Gwen sold her practice."

"OK. I'll be in touch."

"Thanks, Mike."

We said 'goodbye', and I replaced the receiver.

"I still don't get how you can be sued for wrongful death if you didn't kill her," Penny said.

"Remember when we spoke about the felony murder rule? Driving the killer was sufficient for a murder conviction? It's the same concept -- I did something that led to her death. The key is that it has to be something I knew, or should have known, would cause her death, or some direct action I took, or some condition I created. It's that last one that they have to try to use. The argument would be, 'but for their communication via AIM, their agreement to meet, and her visiting his house, she wouldn't have died.'

"There are a number of ways to defend that, but we'll need discovery to decide which one is best. The goal is never to get there and instead win a motion to dismiss. The problem there is that at the initial motion to dismiss stage, they just need a plausible case, and so long as anyone they're suing is plausibly liable, the case goes forward. Fundamentally, Jonathan Kane and I can throw Windy City Taxi under the bus in ways they can't do to us."

"How so?"

"I paid the cabbie to take Nadia to Union Station and expressly stated that was the destination. If Nadia changed it, the chain of responsibility would be broken because I can argue that but for the cabbie's actions, it would never have happened. It's a bit tougher for Jonathan, but they'll have to prove he somehow knowingly created conditions for her to be killed. Did you hear my comments about consensual sex?"

"Yes."

"The cops think she was abducted, bound, raped, and murdered. I think one of those four things is absolutely true, two of them are unlikely to be true, and one is possibly true. They're proceeding on the idea that being tied up proves she was abducted, where I see that as something she likely not only consented to but demanded. And it's entirely possible that she died accidentally. But that doesn't sound as good to the cops as 'rape-murder' and might not even result in any charges except failing to report her death or some similar charge."

"Is that what you think happened?"

"It's a plausible explanation that fits all the facts I know and some assumptions I've made. As I discussed with Mike Knox, the cops are playing things very close to the vest. We need the details to defend ourselves, and we can actually very likely stay the proceedings until the police release the information."

"What happens if they don't?"

"Given we most likely can't subpoena information on an active investigation, we'd argue that the wrongful death suit isn't ripe for hearing because we cannot defend ourselves without knowing what happened. That might or might not fly. I'd have to ask Liz how we'd proceed at trial in that case. But in the end, the goal is to make it go away on a motion to dismiss."

"Even in our circles, being tied to a bed to lose your virginity is extreme."

"Which is why I sent her away. The babysitter fantasy, on the other hand..."

Penny laughed, "Oh, Mr. Adams, I don't know if I could do that!"

"Right," I chuckled. "Who hits on whom?"

Penny laughed again, "True. More like 'Mr. Adams, I demand you pop my cherry and fuck my brains out!'"

"That sounds familiar, Pretty Penny!"

"No cherry, but..."

"Work, Penelope!"

"You're just no fun, Steve! No fun at all!"



February 7, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"I'll be going to the Lab School," Nicholas said when I picked him up for practice early Friday morning. "And playing for Chicago Prep Hockey South."

"Awesome! We'll have about two-thirds of the team, with eight spots for the current Chicago South team. Well, everyone will try out, but I can't imagine any of us who are leaving Kenwood Academy will not make the team."

"Pete?"

"He'd be the one at risk, but the current South goalie is graduating, and their backup is probably about as good as Pete. You can't share this, but Coach Nelson will be our head coach, so I think that works in Pete's favor."

"When did that happen?"

"Doctor Anders called Dad yesterday and let him know. They invited Dad to be a Board member for the hockey organization."

"Is he going to do it?"

"He said he's considering it, but I only have one more year, so Dad won't really be involved with the team after that."

"It'll be weird playing without you after you graduate."

"We have another season, so let's focus on that and worry about the future in the future!"

"Does your dad still have Jobu?"

"Yes. He'll bring him for tomorrow's game against Mikey and Nicole."

"I think it sucks that we have to knock them out to go to State."

"I know, which is why we have to focus and not look ahead. The real challenge is Rockford, who the *Trib* picked to win the state championship. But we can't look forward to Sunday, or we'll lose to Oak Park."

"I'm focused! You know Nicole is going to bring it AAA+++ game, right?"

"Yep. And I'm going to bring mine, too."

"They both have one more year, right?"

"Yes, and hopefully, Mikey can get a hockey scholarship from UW Madison, and we'll all be there with Jerry and Mia. You're going to UofC, right?"

"For sure. Because mom works for the hospital and is an adjunct professor, tuition is almost zero. And you know I'm going there for medical school."

I pulled into the parking lot for Johnny's Ice House, and after I parked, Nicholas and I grabbed our gear and headed inside.

 Birgit

"How are things going, Pumpkin?" Dad asked as I climbed into the chaise next to him to cuddle before breakfast.

"What do you mean?"

"You were struggling with boys."

"I am NOT switching teams!" I declared.

Dad laughed, "I didn't think you would, but at the Compound, you never know!"

"At least I have experimented at playing for the other team!"

"What do you like to say?" Dad asked. "What-ever!"

"Things are fine. You know I hang out with Tomás most of the time, and Bob is my photography buddy, though I'm hoping that changes in Saint Martin."

"Color me surprised," Dad said.

"You mean because I invited him, and he might not have sex with me there?"

"Something along those lines, yes. It shows some maturity in that you think Bob is worth spending time with, even if that doesn't happen."

"Or," I smirked, "I'm positive I can entice him into my bed!"

"I hope that's not the case," Dad said. "Or, if it is, that it takes a back seat to having a healthy relationship with him. He's a good kid. And so is Tomás."

"The pasty white Adams clan could use some color!" I declared.

"You're not wrong, Pumpkin! We do have a surfeit of blondes and strawberry blondes!"

"You are probably the only guy on the planet who would say that ANY number of blondes was excessive!"

He chuckled, "Ask your guy friends in Sweden. Mine were always interested in darker-haired girls, especially Spanish, Italian, or Greek. And look at my two main girlfriends in Sweden."

"Pia and Sofia?"

"Yes. I mean, Karin is about as Nordic-looking as anyone I know, but those other two had darker hair, and Sofia is half-Greek."

"Let's see," I said with a goofy smile. "My mom is blonde, my other mom is strawberry blonde, Suzanne is blonde, Aunt Elyse is blonde, and Aunt Jennifer is strawberry blonde. I detect a pattern!"

Dad laughed, "You might have a point!"

"All the kids except Ashley have blonde or light brown hair; she's the only one with a hint of red like your sister, and she who must not be named!"

"I don't think my mom would be summoned like a demon. And she's basically given up on criticizing."

"Because all the moms told her to STFU if she wanted to see us! Not that any of us really want to be around her because she's so mean."

"I understand, but you also have to acknowledge that she's not as strident, and that's sufficient reason to give a bit."

"Sometimes I don't understand you, Dad. She did everything she could to mess up your life, but you still think we should be nice to her?"

"Because of what it says about us, Pumpkin. We're responsible for how we treat others, no matter what they might do or how they might behave."

"Steve-sama, breakfast in two minutes," Yuriko announced with a knowing smile.

I got three.

 Steve

"Any problems with construction?" I asked Stephanie as I navigated my BMW onto Hyde Park Avenue.

"Nothing important," she replied. "The status memo will go out after lunch today, and the only thing that was in question was somebody's Japanese office."

The «tatami» mats are supposed to ship this week, but by container, then rail, then truck, so it'll be weeks before they arrive here. That's over three months before we need them to meet the completion date. I'm not sure what strings Brown Construction or Phelan-Brown pulled to get them because the original source had said May at the earliest."

"That's good news. I take it Brown is shooting for the bonus date of April 30th?"

"Of course they are! That means we'd be out of 550 West Jackson without having to extend the lease, and I know you'd rather give extra money to Gerald Brown than to Jones Lang LaSalle."

"Obviously. Do we need to give JLL notice?"

"Only if we intend to extend beyond May 30th. Notice is due by April 15th, and we'll know for sure by then."

"What happens if we miss the May 30th date for some reason and don't know until after April 15th?"

"We pay the current advertised square-footage rate plus a 10% penalty to any prospective tenant who has a lease on the space. It won't be a risk because, as I said, we'll know by the end of March if there are any issues. We pay the same rate as now if we extend before April 15th. Eve did a great job negotiating the deal. Changing subjects, what's the situation with the lawsuit?"

"Jonathan Kane and I agreed to put on a joint defense. Hopefully, we can get Windy City Taxi onside."

"I've met him a few times," Stephanie said. "All on the Q-T, of course, given the situation. He's from Goshen."

"What do you know about his background?"

"He married young, even younger than you did, but she died of leukemia not long after. He has a daughter with his version of Jennifer, and he has two boys with his long-term partner. You two have a connection of which I'm positive you aren't aware."

"What's that?"

"His wife was Sensei Ichirō's granddaughter and Ailea's cousin."

"Whoa!" I gasped in surprise. "I had no idea he had another granddaughter."

"I believe she died around Christmas 1983," Stephanie said.

"You know what? That explains a wedding picture I saw at Sensei Ichirō's house of a Japanese-American girl and an Anglo in a kimono. I never asked; I simply assumed it was a niece. Do you know what caused the blowup with Noel Spurgeon?"

"No. Samantha never said, and I wasn't in a position to ask Jonathan. I'm surprised she hasn't told you. She tells you *everything!*"

"That is one of her secrets, and she never named Jonathan until after Noel died. She was always very cagey, which I understand, given the situation. On another topic, are you all settled in the Murder House?"

"You're such a dumb boy, Big brother!" Stephanie declared.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"What-ever! Yes, we're settled in. Joel wants to do some interior work and won't let me pay someone to do it."

"You married the master carpenter!"

I pulled into the parking lot on Halsted, where we had to park during construction, and I was about to get out of the car when my sister put her hand on my arm.

"I'm pregnant."

"OK, I did NOT expect those words to ever cross your lips again!"

"We've gone back and forth on it for the past year and decided I'd stop taking the Pill, and we'd see what happened. Leave it to our family to get pregnant at the first opportunity!"

"The Adams do appear to be fertile! Dad had a vasectomy right after you were born."

Of course, there was a fourth sibling, but Stephanie didn't know, and I couldn't reveal that at this point.

"You're the only one who knows besides Joel," Stephanie said.

"When are you due?"

"Late August or early September."

"When are you going to break the bad news to Davey and Patty?"

"Over the weekend. I suspect you're right that they aren't going to be happy."

"They'll get over it. Jesse and Matthew did!"

Stephanie laughed, "Those two were hilarious with their 'No Sisters' campaign! Fat lot of good it did them! They ended up with three!"

We put on our hats and gloves and got out of the car into the chilly February air.

"If it's OK, I'll tell my wives, but wait to tell the kids until you've broken the news to yours."

"That's fine. I'm sure Davey and Patty will bitch to their cousins about what a terrible mom I am for having a baby when they're nine and seven!"

"As I said, they'll get over it."

We walked quickly to the office, and after pouring a mug of tea, I sat down at my workstation.

 Birgit

"I'm going to be at Chicago Latin next Fall," Tomás said when he came to the house after school.

"Does Jesse know?"

"I told him and Nicholas this morning. That means playing against them next year, which kind of stinks."

"Sure, but you need to get out of Kenwood Academy."

"I remember you bitching up a storm about going to the Lab School!" Tomás said.

"Because nobody *asked* me! I'd have probably decided that way, but my moms decided I didn't have a choice."

"You should talk to MY parents! Seriously, it's like I'm eight. My sister had her «quince», and suddenly, she's an adult! She's two years younger than I am!"

"Parents are really strange," I said. "Is there anything like a quince for guys?"

"No, and mostly, it's when you turn eighteen that you're treated like an adult."

"I bet your parents wouldn't approve of your sister doing the stuff we do!"

"I think my dad expects her to conceive the same way the «la Santísima Virgen» did!"

I laughed, "Good luck having grandkids that way!"

"What are we doing tonight?"

"Pizza then seeing *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*."

"A rom-com? Ugh!"

"We girls put up with action movies and science fiction, so the least you can do is put up with a rom-com!"

"I suppose."

"I could suppose a future where you weren't allowed in my bed..."

"A rom-com sounds great!" Tomás declared piously.

"Thought so!" I giggled.

"I do have to be home as soon as the movie is over tonight because we have our game against Oak Park tomorrow."

"My whole family will be there, including my brothers who live in the burbs. You know, we have twenty-five minutes before we have to leave..."

I grabbed Tomás' hand and led him upstairs.

 Steve

"This is for your ears only," I said to my wives as the four of us relaxed in the Indian room. "Stephanie is pregnant and due in late August."

"WHOA!" Kara gasped. "I didn't expect THAT!"

"Same reaction I had," I chuckled. "They're going to tell Davey and Patty this weekend, then make it public."

"I wonder how that is going to go over with the kids," Suzanne said.

"I expect them to object," I replied, "for all the good it will do. Anyway, please don't say anything until Stephanie confirms she's told the kids."

"What's the plan for the morning?" Kara asked.

"We need to leave at 7:00am so we can be at the rink in Aurora where the regionals are being played. The same will be true on Sunday morning. After the

game, the entire family is going to Blueberry Hill at Eola and New York Street. We'll obviously miss karate in the morning, but I'll have my afternoon class and my mentoring time with Avanti."

"Actual mentoring, or 'mentoring'?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"Actual this week. Avanti wisely deduced that it would be too easy to allow hedonism to suppress true mentoring. Anala said something similar about her relationship with her guru."

"What time will Madalyn be here on Sunday?"

"11:00am, which gives us about four hours before I have to leave for Midway."

"You pushed Philosophy Club to next week because of Mayo, right?"

"Yes. Could I interest the three of you in a sauna?"

"Yes!" my wives exclaimed in unison.

"You should invite Yuriko and Natalie," Suzanne said. "Neither of them went out."

I went to the sunroom and invited the girls, and the six of us headed to the sauna.



February 8, 2003, Aurora, Illinois

When Nicholas and I arrived at Fox Valley Ice Arena, we saw Mikey and Nicole getting out of his mom's minivan, and the four of us walked into the rink together.

"I'm going to own you today, Block!" Nicole declared.

"Bring it!" I replied. "We should get together next weekend, whichever way this goes."

"That sounds good," Mikey said. "We miss seeing you guys."

"I'm transferring to Morgan Park Academy and playing for Chicago Prep Hockey South next year," I said. "Nicholas will play for the same team, but he'll be at the Lab School at UofC."

"What happened?" Nicole asked as we entered the building.

"Gangs going after the African-American and Hispanic players. They used to ignore the sports teams, but now they're targeting them. Morgan Park got wind of it and ended their agreement. They formed the new group and invited me to play for them."

"Best goalie in the city? No surprise there!" Mikey declared.

"Don't build him up!" Nicole declared.

"Just speaking truth," Mikey said.

We split with Mikey and Nicole heading to their locker room and Nicholas and I heading to ours. Fifteen minutes later, Nicholas and I joined the rest of the team for warmups. As we warmed up, I saw my family and friends filter in, including my brothers Matthew and Michael. The only one missing was my Aunt Jessica because she had to work at the hospital.

When we returned to the locker room following warm-ups, Jobu was on the table in the center of the room, and a bunch of the guys cracked jokes from *Major League*. I certainly didn't believe in luck, but I wasn't about to deter any of the guys from thinking Jobu would help us. I certainly didn't think I had God on my side, and as the joke went -- 'Jesus saves, Gretzky gets the rebound, shoots, and scores'.

"The game plan is simple, men -- play good, technical hockey, watch the passing lanes, and put the puck on net. It's not about fancy; it's about playing solid, consistent hockey. Jesse?"

"To quote Gretzky, '*You miss 100% of the shots you don't take*'. But more importantly, and less known, he also said '*Hockey is a unique sport in the sense that you need each and every guy helping each other and pulling in the same direction to be successful*'. And, a quote my dad would love because it's by Mario Lemieux, '*Every day is a great day for hockey*'. So let's go out there and have a great day!"

"RAH!" the team shouted in unison.

We piled out of the locker room and made our way to the ice, where, after skating a half-rink lap, we lined up at center ice for the recorded National Anthem. At the end of the anthem, everyone skated to the benches, with our first O line and first D line staying on the ice with me. I glanced over at Oak Park and saw both Mikey and Nicole on the ice, which meant Oak Park had put out their first lines as well. Both coaches were going conventional, which didn't surprise me in the least.

"Bring it home, Men!" Coach Nelson said, and we all skated to our positions to await the drop of the puck.

 Steve

"They're evenly matched," I observed about six minutes into the game. "Three shots each, and end-to-end, but controlled, not crazy."

"But is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Matthew asked.

"Unless there's some kind of serious breakdown, whoever scores first is likely to win the game," I said. "All it takes is a momentary loss of focus. It would be the same for you on stage - lose focus, and suddenly you don't recall your lines."

"Jesse said he's changing schools. Are things that bad at Kenwood?"

"They're bad, but the deciding factor was when Morgan Park decided to end their arrangement with Kenwood Academy. As stereotypical as it is, with Caucasian students being a significant minority, there just aren't enough players at Kenwood to sustain a team."

"The NHL is pretty white," Matthew observed. "But given something like 80% of the players come from Canada, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, that's not really surprising."

"How's your D&D campaign going?"

"Great! We're playing after brunch."

"Did Mr. Shaughnessy get in touch with your mom?"

"Yes. Everything is set. Chelsea and I will be at Meigs on Friday afternoon, and I made sure Abbie knows the flight plan."

"Good."

 Jesse

When the horn sounded to end the first period, the game was about as even as possible -- no goals for either team, each side had six shots, and neither side had taken a penalty. It wasn't that either side wasn't playing hard, just that we were very evenly matched. Of the six shots I'd turned away, two had been from my friends -- Nicole from the high slot and Mikey from the right point, intended as a shot pass, but it had come straight to me, and I'd easily turned it aside.

"We need to find a way to generate some offense," Nicholas observed as we made our way to the locker room.

"But without sacrificing our defense," Freddy said. "We're both playing conservatively."

"And clean," Mitch said. "No penalties either way."

"These guys aren't St. Rita!" Tomás interjected. "And that Nicole chick is FAST!"

We all stripped off our sweaters, changed T-shirts, and drank bottles of water. Coach complimented us on sticking to the game plan, and encouraged us to continue the same way in the second period.

"We'll change it up in the third if we need to," he said. "But right now, keep it up."

We returned to the ice, and once again, both sides put out their top lines. When the puck was dropped, Jack won the face-off to Tom, and those two and Kenton skated into the Oak Park zone, followed by Freddy and Mike. Oak Park retreated in good order and set up their defense. Two quick passes from Tom to Freddy to Kenton led to a bad-angle shot by Kenton, with the Oak Park goalie giving up a

big rebound, which went straight to Tom, who fired it past the keeper to put us up 1-0.

 Steve

The entire Kenwood Academy section leapt to their feet and cheered as our guys finally broke through to take a 1-0 lead.

"That's what we needed!" Josie exclaimed happily.

"It's not over yet," Jennifer cautioned. "You know Oak Park is going to press hard now."

And press hard they did as soon as the puck was dropped. Our guys withstood two minutes of solid pressure, with Jesse making three saves before Nicholas managed to skate the puck out of the defensive zone rather than just try to clear it. Coach called for a line change, and we set up for our attack. We managed two shots, but neither went in.

Nicole got the puck with clear ice in front of her and skated quickly out of the zone with Tomás to her right and Mitch trailing slightly. Just as Nicole was about to shoot, Tomás poke checked the puck away from her, but their hips touched, and they both went down, bowling into Jesse and the three of them crashed into the net, which came away from its moorings.

Tomás got up quickly, but both Nicole and Jesse stayed down and coaches from both teams quickly went over the boards to check on the players.

"It's bad," Jennifer said worriedly. "They aren't moving."

When neither player moved for about ten seconds, I turned to Doctor Anders, "I think you need to go down."

He got up and hurried down the steps and as quickly as he could, made his way around to the bench and went onto the ice.

 Jesse

"Jesse?" I heard, dazed.

The last thing I remembered was Nicole coming straight at me. Now I was lying on my side on the ice, and my head and left leg hurt. I blinked several times and saw Nicole on her back about a foot away.

"My leg hurts," I said.

"Don't move, please," Doctor Anders said. "Or you, Nicole."

I felt his hands on my neck, and after a bit of prodding, he asked, "Can you sit up?"

"Yeah, but my left leg hurts pretty badly."

He and Coach Nelson helped me sit up, and my head spun, and my stomach felt queasy. Doctor Anders moved to Nicole, checked her, and had her sit up as well.

"I'm going to need help skating off," I said. "I don't think I can put weight on my leg."

"Same," Nicole said.

"Coach, call 9-1-1 and tell them we have two patients with suspected concussions and leg injuries."

Coach Nelson took out his mobile phone and placed the call.

"Can they be moved?" the referee asked. "Or do we need to postpone the game?"

"If we take my pads off, Kenton and Mitch can skate me off," I said.

"I'll carry Nicole off," Mikey said.

"Coach, can I talk to you?" Coach Nelson said to the Oak Park coach.

While they did that, Pete helped me take off my leg pads, and with close supervision from Doctor Anders, he, Kenton, and Mitch helped me up, though I didn't put any weight on my left leg. The fans applauded as they helped me off the ice and to the locker room. About a minute later, Mikey carried Nicole into the same locker room.

"You OK?" I asked Nicole.

"My right leg hurts like a mother..." she said. "And I have a hell of a headache."

"Me too, but my left leg. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I was about to shoot, Tomás poke checked, and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the ice next to you."

"Are you OK, Jesse?" Mom One said, coming into the locker room with Mom Two, Dad, and the Heaths.

"My left knee hurts like hell, and I probably have a mild concussion."

"Nicole?" her mom said.

"Same," Nicole replied, "but my right leg. What happened?"

"You and Tomás bumped hips," Mom One said, "then went sprawling into Jesse, and the three of you crashed into the net."

"Are they going to finish the game?" Nicole asked.

"The coaches are discussing it right now," Mrs. Heath said.

"Tell 'em they should," I declared.

"Yeah," Nicole agreed. "Keep playing."

Coach Palmer, who had come into the room, said he'd let Coach Nelson and the Oak Park coach know what we'd said. He was back two minutes later.

"They're going to finish as soon as the paramedics take you guys."

"Mikey," Nicole said. "Go back to the team and win it for me!"

Mike moved over, gave her a quick kiss, then left the locker room. With approval from Doctor Anders, we removed our helmets, sweaters, and shoulder pads, then Mr. Heath removed Nicole's skates while Mitch helped with mine.

"What do you think, Doctor Anders?" Dad asked.

"Mild concussions and sprained knees, most likely," he said.

About five minutes later, two Aurora paramedics and four firemen came into the locker room with a pair of gurneys.

"Jen, you and Josie go with the kids," Dad said. "I'll go speak to everyone else. I doubt Rush could handle twenty people milling around their waiting room. Is that OK, Jesse?"

"Yeah, Dad. It's cool."

Dad left, and five minutes later, both Nicole and I were wheeled out of the locker room by the paramedics.

 Steve

I left the locker room and returned to my extended family.

"How is he?" Libby asked.

"Probably a mild concussion and a sprained knee. Nicole has similar injuries. They both insisted that the game continue. Mom One and Mom Two are going to the hospital along with the Heaths, including Natalie."

"What about you?" Kara asked.

"I checked with Jesse and he's OK with just his moms. It would be a madhouse in the waiting room if everyone went. I think we'll still have brunch and wait to see what the doctors at the ER have to say."

"How do you stay so calm?" Chelsea asked.

"That's my dad," Matthew interjected. "In a crisis, he's the picture of calm, orderly response. Mom, too!"

"Nice recovery, Foo!" Birgit teased.

I laughed, "Nobody has called him that in ages!"

"I just consider the source," Matthew said.

"Tomás looks like he's OK," Birgit observed.

"He is," I confirmed. "Nicole ended up under Jesse, and Tomás landed on Jesse's leg, so he probably only has bruises, if even that."



Jesse

Nicole and I were loaded into the same Fire Department ambulance which left the rink with just lights, no sirens, and driving at the speed limit.

"Well, this sucks," Nicole grouched. "No matter what happens, we won't be able to play tomorrow because of the injury rules."

"Are you two on the same team?" one of the paramedics asked.

"No," I replied. "She's a forward for Oak Park, and I'm a goalie for Kenwood Academy."

"What happened?" he asked.

"A hip check by one of my teammates that caused Nicole and him to fall and crash into me. I landed on Nicole, and the other player somehow landed on my

leg, or so my mom said, and we slid into the goal. Neither Nicole nor I remember anything after my teammate poke-checked the puck from her. What does the machine that goes ping say?"

The paramedic laughed, "Good pulse, good blood oxygenation, and good temperatures. Your BPs are both in range. Ice packs on your knees, but the docs will have to decide what to do about the concussions."

"Rest," I said. "My dad has had a couple, and that was the prescription."

 Steve

It took about ten minutes for the game to resume with Pete in goal for us and with Oak Park playing short one forward. That created line problems for Oak Park and, in the end, led to Kenwood winning the game 3-1, gaining the right to play the winner of the Joliet Catholic/Glencoe match, which would begin in an hour. After checking with everyone, we agreed we'd head to Blueberry Hill for brunch. I retrieved Jobu, then left the rink. On the way out to the car, I called Jennifer to get an update.

"Other than not remembering the crash, they both seem fine," she said. "They're each going to have an MRI on their knees, but the ER doctor doesn't think there are any ligament tears. What happened with the game?"

"We won 3-1," I replied. "Once their first O line was disrupted by removing Nicole, we had a clear advantage, and Pete did a good job in net."

"Are you guys at Blueberry Hill?"

"On our way. How long on the MRIs?"

"They expect we'll be out of here mid-afternoon when all is said and done."

"Do you want me to come there?"

"It's not necessary. Jesse said he'll see you at home."

"Sounds good."

XXVIII. Madalyn Fowler, Ace Reporter

February 8, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

When we arrived home on Saturday afternoon, I asked to go to the sunroom, so I didn't have to climb any stairs, and my moms agreed. About ten minutes later, my dad returned from his afternoon karate class.

"How are you feeling?" Dad asked.

"My knee hurts, but my headache has mostly gone away. No tears, just stretched ligaments. Nicole wasn't so lucky -- she has a torn ACL and will have arthroscopic surgery on Monday. The doctor said girls are more than five times more likely to have ACL injuries than guys. It doesn't help that I outweigh her by about sixty pounds."

"What did the doctor order?"

"Rest for seventy-two hours, then have a neurological exam. I have a brace for my knee, and Mom One will make an appointment with a sports medicine doctor. She's calling Doctor Al for a referral.

"No school on Monday or Tuesday?"

"That's what the doctor said. If the exam on Tuesday afternoon is clear, then I can go back to school on Wednesday. Do you know who won the second game?"

"Rockford. I spoke to Coach Nelson on my way back from karate."

"I want to go to the game," I said.

"Take that one up with your moms! You can try to sweet talk Jess into saying it's OK, but I wouldn't count on it."

"That sucks!" I growled.

"The guys know you're rooting for them," Dad countered.

"I know, but I should be there."

"You're staying home and resting, Mister!" Mom Two said, coming into the sunroom. "You're going to follow the doctor's orders."

I scowled because I knew there was nobody to whom I could appeal. There was no way Aunt Jess or Doctor Al would take my side, and Dad was following his agreement with my moms to defer to their decisions.

"I'll be in my study if you need anything, Jesse," Dad said.

He and Mom Two left, and I pulled out my mobile phone and pressed the speed dial I had for Larisa because I knew if I didn't call her, there would be hell to pay. Her mom answered, and she called Larisa to the phone.

"Jesse? How did your game go?"

"We won, but I hurt my knee when two players crashed into me."

"Are you OK?" she asked, sounding worried.

"Yes. I had an MRI, and it's just a sprain. I have a headache, but it's not nearly as bad as it was. I'm going to miss a few days of school, and I'll miss the game tomorrow, for sure, and probably the state championship games."

"That stinks! You'll be able to play again, right?"

"Yes. I'll have a rehab program, and by the time hockey starts in the Fall, I'll be ready to go."

"What about your hockey camp?"

"It's not until July, so I have more than four months. I'll talk to a sports medicine specialist this week, but I think I should be OK. I can certainly coach even if I miss the training session."

"I'm sorry you were hurt, Jesse. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so. I'll see you in about a month."

"OK. Call me and let me know what the doctors say, please."

"I will."

We said 'goodbye' and closed my phone just as Luna, Libby, Lilibeth, and Simone came into the room.

"We came to cheer you up!" Luna declared.

"And just how do you plan to do that?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

The girls all laughed and sat down to talk.

 Steve

"If you need to spend time with Jesse, I'll understand," Avanti said as we sat in my study.

"I believe Jesse will have all the attention he needs," I replied. "Libby and Luna let me know they and some of the girls were going come over to keep him company. How was your week?"

"Good. Things are pretty mellow Freshman year. Obviously, I'm taking it seriously because I want straight A's, but classes are pretty easy, too."

"Have you given more thought to your career?"

"Medicine," I think. "Probably neurosurgery because it's the most difficult."

"There is no margin for error on that," I replied. "You'll need to be perfect every step of the way."

"Easy enough for the daughter of Anala Subramani!" Avanti declared confidently.

"Of that, I have no doubt! I assume things are good at home?"

"Yes. Dad trusts me, so I'm almost as free as your kids, though he's not nearly as open-minded as you are. Mom, on the other hand, is very much like you. And my brother and I get along well enough."

"We've never really spoken about friends."

"There are two girls at school I'm close to, plus one from the Hindu temple. That's more my speed than having a dozen girls as part of my posse the way Birgit does."

"I'm not sure I'd model anything I did on what Birgit does," I chuckled.

"She's not that bad!" Avanti protested.

"Of course not," I agreed. "But she can be over the top."

"I'd say she comes by it honestly!"

"Perhaps," I allowed. "Is there anything specific you want to discuss today?"

"No. Right now, I think the karate classes and Philosophy Club are providing what I need. I just want to enjoy spending time talking with you on the weekends when we're not engaging in enjoying the union of our bodies and sharing our essences."

"Sauna?"

"And the hot tub, please."

I took her hand, and we left my study.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Matthew

My *D&D* campaign session only lasted about four hours because of brunch with my family. When we finished for the day, everyone left, and Chelsea and I borrowed my mom's car so we could go into the city to see my brother. Chelsea

drove, of course, as I didn't have my learner's permit, something I'd be able to get in about a month.

"Do you plan to work over the Summer?" Chelsea asked as we headed for I-88.

"Yes. I'm going to apply at Red Robin in Oswego right after my birthday."

"Waitstaff or kitchen?"

"Waitstaff. Kevin from Drama works there, and he says he can get me in."

"How do you feel about moving to the new High School?"

"Good, actually. Mr. Fruits is moving because most of the Freshman and Sophomore kids in drama are going to end up at the new school. And we'll be upperclassmen the entire way, because they're only moving the Freshmen and incoming Freshmen to the new school. The fact that it's so much closer is a big plus, too."

"Who do you lose?"

"Tara and Jim," I replied. "Arby, Nick, Josh, Ryan, and Matt W are all going to be at what they're going to call Oswego East. The new Junior High will be Bednarcik, and the grade school will be Wolf's Crossing."

"So Michael will move to the Junior High?"

"Yes. Everyone is changing schools, or will, because Jesse is going to the private school that offered him a spot on their team, Albert is going to a school with a strong NJROTC detachment, and my other siblings all moved to the Lab School at UofC. But compared to my dad, it's nothing! He went to a different school for

every grade K through seventh, and a different building every year except eighth and ninth."

"Wow!"

"Grandpa A moved the family around a lot, but I'm not sure why. It might have something to do with working for the CIA, but I'm not sure."

"Have you ever found out anything about your great-grandparents? I mean, on his side?"

"No."

"You should check out ancestry.com. There's a ton of stuff on there, and more being added all the time. Do you know the names of your great-grandparents?"

"Maurice and Blanche Tobias," I replied.

"Tomorrow, we should look stuff up. My dad traced our entire family tree back to before the Civil War when the first members from both sides of the family immigrated from Ireland and Germany. He'd probably let us use his account because we could attach your family tree to ours, which will happen as soon as you graduate from High School!"

"Have you started planning the wedding?" I asked.

"Not yet! I was thinking it might be cool to marry when you graduate from Great Lakes so you can wear your dress whites!"

"I'm not sure how that would work. I'd have to speak to a recruiter, but that's still almost two years away. I don't want to freak out my mom."

"She's totally cool!" Chelsea protested.

"And yet, she's still a mom! Think about Aunt Jessica and her freakouts about Albert flying. Or Aunt Bethany and Nicholas wanting to join the Navy, even as a doctor."

"I don't get your Aunt Jessica, but Doctor Bethany seems unstable to me."

"Maybe, but can you blame her? Her husband was murdered while serving in the Navy, and she almost died in a car crash. Not to mention being raped at thirteen."

"I suppose, but Birgit said she's acting erratic."

"I love my sister, but I'm not sure she's the best judge of erratic behavior!"

Chelsea laughed, "She certainly enjoys life!"

"So do we, just without the drama and 'over-the-top' behavior!"



Jesse

Luna, Libby, Lilibeth, and Simone left, and not long after, Tomás, Freddy, Mitch, Pete, and Nicholas came to see me, bringing pizza with them.

"Who scored?" I asked as we all dug into the pizza.

"Besides Tom, it was Nicholas and Kenton," Tomás replied. "Mikey got one by Pete at the end with a six-on-five. Not really Pete's fault because he was completely screened."

"I hate those," I said. "I asked my moms about coming to the game tomorrow, but they said 'no' because of the concussion."

"That sucks doubly," Mitch declared.

"Pete can do it. He's been practicing all season, and he played well in both his games and it sounds like he did yesterday, too. We have all our skaters, so just do what we do!"

"Will your dad be at the game?" Kenton asked.

"Yes. There's no way he wouldn't bring Jobu at this point! Unfortunately, he has to go back after tomorrow."

Matthew and Chelsea came in just then, and we invited them to join us for pizza.

"How's your knee?" Matthew asked.

"The ice helps," I replied. "My headache is mostly gone."

"Is this where the lame duck is?" Doctor Al asked, coming into the sunroom.

"Hardy-har-har," I replied flatly.

"Mind if I check your leg and eyes?"

"Could I stop you?" I asked with a grin.

Doctor Al laughed and came over to me. He used a penlight and his finger to check my eyes, then carefully removed the brace to check my knee.

"Everything looks good," he said, replacing the brace. "I saw the MRI using the videoconferencing system we have with Rush, and I'm positive their diagnosis is correct. When are your follow-ups?"

"Tuesday for the neuro check at UofC. Mom One was going to speak to you about a sports medicine referral."

"I'll go speak to her. I know just the guy, and we'll get him to see you on Monday."

"Thanks. Want some pizza?"

"I'm having dinner with Doctor Washington, but I wanted to stop in to check on you."

"Thanks," I said.

He left, and my friends, my brother, and Chelsea, had a good time eating pizza and chatting. When we finished, Kenton helped me to the coach house, where my moms had pulled out the sofa bed so I didn't have to climb the stairs. The guys left, and Mom One let me know I had a Monday morning appointment with Doctor Resnick at 8:00am on Monday to check my knee.



February 9, 2003, Aurora, Illinois

 Steve

"This is NOT looking good," I said. "Rockford is dominating."

"But they haven't scored," Libby said.

I was at the rink early on Sunday morning with a bunch of the kids from Kenwood Academy, with only Natalie and Birgit coming with me to cheer on the team. That still left a big cheering section, even without the rest of the family. The guys were playing hard, but Rockford was controlling the game completely, and that paid off with just under two minutes to go in the period when a deflected puck got by Pete, and a collective groan rose from the Kenwood Academy section of the stands.

As I'd promised, when the period ended, I called Jesse to let him know the score.

"It was a tough deflection stick side," I explained. "And it rolled over his blocker. He almost had it."

"Have we had any chances?" Jessie asked.

"Just two shots, and neither of them quality. Rockford is playing up to the hype."

"I was afraid of that," Jesse said. "Keep me posted."

"I will."

I ended the call and slipped the phone back into my pocket. I chatted with Jesse's friends, and Libby flirted lightly, but with Lilibeth next to her, she was keeping it toned down. I didn't expect anything to come of it, given what we'd discussed when we'd been together.

"I heard you saw CeCe at Arizona State," Luna said. "I talked to her last night."

"I did," I confirmed. "She's hostessing at the restaurant at the hotel I use there. Did you tell her about Jesse?"

"That's why I called her. I know they had some issues when she left, but I also know she cares about him. She's coming home for Spring Break next month."

"Larisa is visiting then," Birgit interjected.

"I don't think that's a problem," Luna countered. "I don't think CeCe wants to get back together with Jesse; she'll just want to see him."

"Just check with him," Birgit counseled.

The teams came back onto the ice, and a minute later, the puck was dropped. Our guys played hard, but Rockford simply overpowered them, scoring another goal to take a 2-0 lead into the locker room after the second period. I called Jesse to let him know, and he was decidedly unhappy.

"Pete made nine saves, and we only had three shots," I said to Jesse. "I hate to say it, but these guys are in another league. Not quite Canadian-level, but I can't see them not winning the State Championship."

"Pete's going to feel as if he let the team down," I said. "Do me a favor -- when you get Jobu, tell Pete to come by this afternoon, OK?"

"Will do."

Things didn't improve, and despite Nicholas netting a goal, Rockford beat us 4-1. The guys had given their all, but Rockford was just that much better. After the usual handshake line finished, I went to the subdued locker room to retrieve Jobu and let Pete know Jesse had asked for him to come over.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"How are you doing?" Pete asked when he came into the sunroom late on Sunday morning.

"My knee hurts, but the headache is gone. I still can't remember anything after Tomás poke-checked the puck until I came to on the ice next to Nicole. How are you doing?"

"Shitty. I gave up four goals."

"Three," I said. "Forget the stupid stats; that last one was an empty net. And according to my dad, the first one was a deflection you got a blocker on."

"We were undefeated until today," he said.

"And there's no guarantee I'd have done any better," I replied. "You're a good goalie, Pete."

"But you're better."

"Fine, I'm better. That doesn't make you not a good goalie! You should easily make the team next year, and I bet you're the starting goalie your Senior year. But not if you beat yourself up. The guys only scored one goal, which is a tough situation because you have to be perfect, and that's tough for anyone."

"Yeah, I guess," Pete said.

"Hey, we're the Chicago citywide champs, and you won both your games to keep us undefeated, and you held off Oak Park yesterday to make it to the regional finals. That's not nothing!"

"You're right, of course."

"Need anything, Jesse?" Birgit asked, coming into the sunroom.

"Nope. Just trying to cheer up Pete."

"Hey, Birgit," Pete said.

"Hi! I'll leave you guys alone."

She left, and a minute later, Ashely came in and asked the same question.

"You and Birgit need to coördinate," I chuckled. "She was just here!"

"If you do need anything, just holler. I'll be in the great room with my friends."

"Thanks, Ashes!"

She left, and Pete shook his head.

"One sister is enough! I can't imagine having three!"

"They aren't too bad," I allowed. "But if you tell them I said that, you're a dead man!"

Pete laughed, "Gotta keep up the image, right?"

"Yep!"

 Steve

The doorbell rang just before 11:00am, and because Ashley was with her friends, I actually got to the door to answer it.

"Hi!" Madalyn exclaimed. "I'm here for an 'up close and personal' interview!"

"You're a lot prettier than Jim McKay! I'm surprised you know about him. Come in."

She stepped into the house, and I shut the door.

"Mrs. Toepfer, who is the advisor for *The Midway*, told us about him."

"Mary Toepfer?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"She was MY English teacher my Senior year at Milford High!"

"She's been teaching at the Lab School for about five years. You graduated in '81, right?"

"Yes. Shall we go to the Playroom?"

"Playroom?"

"A room off the kitchen that was used by servants back in the day, long before I bought the house. I think you'll appreciate it."

I took her hand and led her through the kitchen and into the short hallway. I closed and locked the door, then led her into the playroom, where I'd already removed the tapestry that covered the mirrors on the ceiling.

"Mirrors?" Madalyn asked.

"You can watch!"

"Interesting!"

"So, Madalyn Fowler, Ace Reporter, how would you like to conduct your interview?"

"I believe I need to present my credentials first!" she declared.

She opened her purse and extracted an envelope, which she handed to me. I reviewed it, saw it was clean and handed it back. She removed her billfold, slipped her driver's license from its pocket, and handed it to me.

"So there's no question I'm legal," she said.

"I appreciate that," I replied. "Your credentials are accepted."

I handed back her license and then showed her my STI card.

"As are yours!" she replied.

"Interview procedures?"

"I'm here for an out-of-this-world first time! I have one limit and one warning."

"OK," I replied, curious.

"Antionette was very detailed, and I'm not interested in anal."

"That's an 'on-request' service only," I replied with a grin.

That was true, though the request was sometimes made euphemistically or by implication.

"The warning is that my mom told me she bled her first time when she was twenty, and it wasn't due to lack of foreplay."

"That's really rare after age eighteen and uncommon after age sixteen, but it does happen. Anything else?"

"I'm ready if you are!"

"May I see what I'm about to get into?" I asked with a grin.

Madalyn laughed softly, then began undressing. I followed suit, baring skin in tandem with her until we were standing naked, facing each other. Madalyn was about my height, though a smidge taller, with long legs, modest breasts, and a neatly trimmed V of blonde pubic hair above plump labia.

"Any last requests as a virgin?" I asked with a smile.

Madalyn smirked, "I regret that I have but one virginity to give for my orgasms!"

I laughed, held out my arms, and she stepped forward. As we embraced, her hard nipples pressed into my chest, and we shared our first kiss. She tasted of green apples, which had always been my favorite lip gloss, though lip gloss had, unfortunately, fallen out of common use. I broke the soft, sexy French kiss, and Madalyn and I climbed into bed. After another soft French kiss, I moved so I

could kiss, lick, and suck Madalyn's nipples, then kissed my way down her flat stomach.

I stopped, of course, to nuzzle my nose in her soft, blonde pubic hair before planting kisses along her plump labia. I slipped my arms under her legs, then gently probed with the tip of my tongue, finding the predicted barrier -- a ring of flesh with a small central opening. Taking no risks that I'd push my tongue through her hymen, I turned my attention to her clit.

Madalyn moaned softly as I teased her clit with my tongue, then groaned when I closed my mouth around it. I sucked gently on her clit and continued teasing it with my tongue, and she responded by putting a hand on the back of my head and gently pushing her hips upwards to increase the pressure and, thereby, the pleasure. I enjoyed the musky flavor of Madalyn's juices which coated my tongue and lips, as well as my chin, and worked to bring her off, which I succeeded in doing about three minutes later.

When her orgasm began, I quickly moved on top of her, rubbed my glans along her slick labia, and thrust my hips forward, piercing her barrier. Madalyn grunted, and I pulled back slightly, then pushed fully into her, causing her to groan deeply. I lowered my mouth to hers, French kissed her, and began thrusting in and out of her tight tunnel.

After a few thrusts, Madalyn wrapped her legs around me and began raising her hips to meet my thrusts, and we developed a steady rhythm, slowly increasing the power and pace of our movements. Madalyn had two very good orgasms over the next fifteen minutes and then a third one about five minutes later when I came here, pumping jet after jet of cum into her.

When both our orgasms had passed, I gently withdrew, moved off her, and lay on my back. In the mirror, I saw blood on my slowly deflating shaft, as well as on Madalyn's thighs.

"Mom was right about the blood," Madalyn observed, breathing hard. "But it didn't really hurt. Just kind of like a quick pinch."

I gently encouraged her into my usual cuddle position while I recovered. Madalyn put her head on my chest and sighed deeply.

"I appreciate the lip gloss," I said.

Madalyn laughed softly, "Antoinette said you liked it; I don't normally use it."

We lay quietly together, and I tried to remember discussing it with her but couldn't. I suspected Holly had mentioned it to Antoinette at some point, and that wasn't an issue in any way.

"Ready for the next round?" I asked about ten minutes later.

"Yes!" Madalyn exclaimed happily.

"Sixty-nine," I replied. "And to make it more exciting, don't swallow and then French-kiss me."

"INNNNNTERESTING!" Madalyn exclaimed, exaggerating the word.

"May I point out I'm about to put my tongue in your freshly-fucked pussy in which I just came?"

Madalyn laughed, "Good point! What about the blood?"

"I'm game if you are!" I declared.

I helped her into position, and she lowered herself until her labia touched my lips. I pressed my tongue between them, tasting a combination of her juices, her blood, and my cum. Madalyn took my glans into her mouth, and we each swirled our tongues to begin pleasuring each other. I hardened fairly quickly, and Madalyn began stroking, bobbing, licking, and sucking as I tongued her clit. I gave her two orgasms before I groaned, and my cum spurted into Madalyn's soft mouth.

As soon as I was no longer pulsing, Madalyn released me and turned to kiss me, but I first had her mount me. She slid down my shaft, began grinding, then leaned down for a sloppy French kiss, sharing my cum with me. We kissed until Madalyn brought herself off, then broke the kiss. She moved off my softening shaft and cuddled next to me.

"You don't find that weird?" she asked.

"Not really. It comes down to knowing many girls really get off on the idea, so I do it."

"You'll do pretty much anything a girl wants?"

"So long as it doesn't cause injury or serious pain and doesn't involve any bodily fluids other than saliva, cum, or female juices."

"Blood?" she asked.

"From virginity or earning my red wings, but not otherwise."

"That term I don't know."

"Oral sex on a girl having her period, which generally ends up with her menstrual blood on the guy's cheeks and her thighs. Red wings."

"Did you like it?"

"She did, which is what mattered."

"Will you reveal anything extreme you've done?"

"Floggers, light bondage, and pegging."

"Two more terms I don't know."

"Do you know what a Roman «flagellum» is?"

"Sure. A scourge."

"In the context of sex, it's a small whip used during sex. Some people get off on the pain, some by inflicting it, even symbolically. Pegging means a female using a dildo in a harness to have anal sex with a guy."

"You've done that?"

"Yes. Some women get off on it, and I tolerate it to make them happy. And before you get any ideas, I'll agree to reciprocity!"

Madalyn laughed softly, "Thus neatly escaping a request I might have made!"

"Not changing your mind?" I asked.

"No. I mean, I am totally curious what it would be like to do that to you, but not curious enough to want you to do that to me."

"And here we've hit on the key to awesome sex -- communication. You say what you like, say what you don't like, and then agree together on what to do. Sometimes, you'll do things you don't prefer to keep your partner happy; other times, he or she will."

"She?"

"The mother of my eldest son is in a lifelong, committed relationship with another woman. I make no assumptions and no judgments. I know women who are lesbian, bi, and straight, including some basically straight women who have experimented with same-sex partners."

"Have you?"

"No. That's a stark line I have no desire to cross. And that's another key to good sex -- understand what is off-limits and communicate it. If you're ready for the next round, we can begin."

"Yes!"

"Is there anything you need for your article on the site you mentioned?"

"Nothing specific. Do what you want, within the limits I set!"

"Then lotus position, doggy-style, and missionary. We'll have just enough time for a shower where you give me a blowjob before I have to leave for the airport."

"Sounds great!" Madalyn declared.



Jesse

"Jesse, Zahra is here," Ashley said. "Is it OK for her to come in? She has Zaida and Adi with her."

I wasn't surprised that the three girls were together, as that was pretty much required by their parents, and they needed a male escort when we went out on Friday nights.

"Yes, of course," I agreed.

The three girls came into the sunroom, and Ashley left.

"Hi," I said.

"How is your leg?" Zahra asked.

"It hurts. I'm seeing a doctor tomorrow."

"Will you still be able to play?" Adi asked.

"It's just a sprain, so yes. I might have to wear a knee brace for a time, but with goalie pads, that's not a big deal."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Zahra asked.

"A dangerous question!" Birgit declared, coming into the sunroom.

"Stow it, Sis! Their dads are already wary about them going out of their houses!"

"He's right, Birgit," Zaida said. "You know the rules we have to follow."

"And you know my opinion of those rules! Anyway, everyone else is in the attic room, so come up when you're ready."

She left.

"Adi, would you and Zaida let me have a few minutes with Jesse without tattling? We'll just be here in this room."

"Sure," Adi said. "I'm not going to say anything."

"Me, either," Zahra agreed.

The two of them walked out of the sunroom, leaving Zahra with me.

"I miss you," she said quietly. "And I miss what we used to do."

"I miss spending time with you, too, and not just for that. I mean, I liked it, obviously."

"I heard you're changing schools?"

"To Morgan Park so I can play hockey. Kenwood Academy is ending their program."

"I wish there was a way to see you," she said.

"Me, too, but the problem is with your parents, and I don't see your dad changing his mind unless I convert to Islam, which I'm not interested in doing."

Zahra frowned.

"Could I kiss you before I go upstairs?"

"That's completely up to you," I said.

She moved next to the chaise, sat down, then moved so our lips could touch. The kiss was soft and inviting, but there wasn't really anything I could do about it. She broke the kiss, sighed deeply, then got up.

"See you later," she said.

She left the room, and Albert, Matthew, and Michael came in.

"You can use the elevator, right?" Albert asked.

"Yes."

"Then video games in my room!" he declared.

He and Matthew helped me to the elevator, and Matthew and I rode up together. Albert and Michael met us on the second floor, and they helped me to Albert's room.



Steve

I groaned as I came in Madalyn's mouth following an awesome shower blowjob. Following the last spurt, Madalyn released me, then stood up so we could exchange a sloppy French kiss.

"I'm absolutely going to have the best story ever on the site!" Madalyn declared as I began soaping her body.

"How detailed are the stories?"

"It depends on the person writing them, really. Some are really short with no actual details; some are novellas and include relationship stories. Mine will be detailed about the fantastic sex, including blood on my thighs and mutual oral sex immediately after, followed by that French kiss. No names and no details that would let anyone figure it out. We're all anonymous."

"Is this an open forum?"

"No. You have to be invited by someone else, and they have to vouch for you."

"I wouldn't mind reading what you write, if you're willing to share."

"I am."

I finished soaping Madalyn, and she moved under the spray to rinse off. Once she had, she took the soap and washed me, and once I'd rinsed off, we got out. We dried each other, then returned to the bedroom to dress. Once we'd dressed, she helped me change the sheets on the bed.

"When do you plan to start attending Philosophy Club?" I asked.

"August, most likely. Once I move into the dorms at Northwestern, I'll have more freedom."

"I'm curious -- why there instead of UofC, given your dad is a professor?"

"I have a full scholarship to Northwestern, so I could choose without worrying about it."

"You're welcome anytime before then. Birgit will be able to let you know which Sundays we meet. The next meeting is next Sunday, though I won't expect you until the Fall."

"I'll keep in touch, too."

"Sounds good!"

I walked her to the front door, where we exchanged a quick kiss. Once she'd left, I went upstairs to finish packing for my trip. Kara and Suzanne came into the room a few minutes later.

"Report, please!" Kara requested with a silly smile.

"Blood proof, believe it or not!"

"You're positive she was eighteen?" Kara asked.

"Birgit said Madalyn is a Senior, and her birthdate on her test report and driver's license match. She's a rarity like Jess."

"And?" Kara asked.

"Fun but conventional," I replied. "She did promise to share what she posts to the anonymous web forum. She'll join Philosophy Club in the Fall."

"Repeat?"

"She didn't ask," I replied. "I suspect Antoinette explained things. I'd be amenable to another time, but I won't pursue it. The new «lagom» hasn't limited me from finding willing partners, including some virgins."

"And Saint Martin is just over a month away."

"Yes. I'm going to say 'goodbye' to the kids, then head to Midway."

I kissed and hugged both Kara and Suzanne, then stuck my head into Albert's room to say 'goodbye' to the boys. I asked Jesse to call me after he saw the doctor, and he promised to do so. Next, I went to Ashley and Stephie's room and got a hug from Ashley, who had her friends with her. Stephie was at her friend Veronica's house, so I left the room and headed up to the attic room.

Birgit jumped up and hurried over to give me a hug.

"Is Madalyn happy?" Birgit asked quietly. "Wait! What am I thinking? Of COURSE she is!"

"Behave, young lady!" I said with a smile. "I'll see you on Tuesday evening."

Birgit kissed my cheek and I kissed her forehead, then left the attic room. I had just reached the stairs when I heard my name called quietly. I turned to see Tiffany.

"Can anyone get a hug?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied.

She hurried to me and gave me a tight hug.

"Five weeks," she sighed.

"I'm looking forward to it," I said with a smile.

"Me, too!" she said happily.

She released me and went back into the attic room and I went downstairs, grabbed my bag from my room, then went down to the ground floor. Both

Natalie and Yuriko hugged me and they each gave me a kiss. After that, I left the house, got into my car and headed for Midway for my flight to Rochester.



February 9, 2003, Rochester, Minnesota

 Steve

My flight to Rochester was uneventful, and my seatmate was a strident woman who was unsatisfied with literally everything about the flight. I simply put on my noise-canceling headphones once that was permitted and tuned her out. I almost laughed at the thought that she was Dante but without the charm.

In Rochester, Don picked me up at the airport and took me to the Mariott. Once I'd checked in and freshened up, he drove us to his house for my evening with him and Mary, Alejandra and Trent, Naomi and Greg, and Sonya. The guys greeted me with a handshake and the women with a kiss on the cheek, except Sonya, who gave me a quick peck on the lips.

We had a good meal and a nice dessert, both of which Mary and Don had prepared to fit my diet. After our meal, we spent a few hours catching up and discussing world events, including the coming war in Iraq. When the gathering broke up, Sonya offered to drop me at the hotel, and I agreed. I shook hands with the guys and exchanged kisses on the cheek with the girls, then Sonya and I left.

"Do you want company?" she asked.

"I enjoyed our time together, so yes, I would, if you're interested."

"I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't!"

"Tomorrow, I have plans with an old friend from Ohio who'll be here with her friend who's having an EEG-MRI."

"I think I know the case, but I obviously can't say anything. You know the score."

"Quite well. I'm actually surprised you aren't seeing someone."

"I'm dating, but not exclusively. I have plenty of time before I need to settle down to have kids."

"STI test?"

"Yes. I remember the rules, and I'd do that anyway, given I'm not monogamous."

"Very wise."

We reached the hotel, and Sonya used the valet parking service, which I instructed should be charged to my room.

"I do need to get a decent amount of sleep," I said. "1:00am an OK time for you?"

"That gives us about two and a half hours," she said, quickly shedding her sweater.

We both undressed and got into bed, and at Sonya's request, I once again proved my tongue knew the way around the 'Holy of Holies', as she'd called it when we'd been together. Fortunately, it had been about six hours since I'd been with Madalyn, so I was able to meet Sonya's request for a reprise of what she'd called the best fuck she'd ever had, including an encore.

"Set the alarm early enough that we can fool around in the shower," she requested when we finished the second round."

I did that and turned out the light, then she snuggled close, and we fell asleep.

XXIX. A Medical Miracle

February 10, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Hi, Jesse, I'm Doctor McCoy."

I laughed, "No way!"

"I am, indeed, a doctor, not a bricklayer! What brings you to see me today?"

"A three-way pileup on a hockey rink in Aurora. One of my defensemen hip-checked a forward on the other team, and they crashed into me. I ended up on top of the forward, and my defenseman landed on me. I'm pretty sure my knee was twisted in the process, but I hit my head, so I don't remember anything from when right before it happened until I woke up about thirty seconds later. I have a neuro check tomorrow for a mild concussion, and I'm here to see you because I have a Grade 1 knee sprain, according to the MRI that the ER docs ran at Rush-Copley. My knee hurts, but my headache is gone, and no double-vision or anything like that."

"Good report! Are you planning a medical career?"

"No chance! I'll leave that to Aunt Jess and Grandpa Al!"

"The nurse took your vitals, so I'll just check your knee. I did see the MRI and agree that it's a Grade 1 sprain. Can you slip off your sweats?"

I did that, and he removed the brace I was wearing, then unwrapped the Ace bandage. He performed a number of flexion tests and also felt for swelling, comparing my 'good' leg to the injured one.

"Besides hockey practice, what do you do for exercise?"

"I have free weights that I use five times a week, plus I walk to and from school every day. I have a bike, but I don't ride it very often now that I have a driver's license."

"Have you decided on a college yet?"

"UW-Madison is the most likely school."

"Do you intend to play competitive hockey in college?"

"I don't plan to try out for the NCAA team; I'll probably play for the club team."

"No desire to play in the NHL?"

"No. Does that make a difference in treatment?"

"For a Grade 1 sprain, generally not, but if you had that desire, I'd probably refer you to a guy at Northwestern who specializes in ACL injuries for college and pro athletes, just to be on the safe side. Given what you said, I think you should follow the RICE protocol for the next ten days. Did they explain that in the Emergency Department?"

"The discharge notes instructed Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation. That's what I've been doing."

"Good. Continue to do that. I'm going to suggest you get a ride to school for the next ten days and use crutches when you walk, but keep walking to a minimum. No driving at least until I see you a week from Friday. We'll evaluate your knee and agree on a rehab plan."

"I'm supposed to attend hockey camp in June and be an instructor in July."

"Coaching will certainly be possible, but we won't know about playing for about eight weeks. Your prognosis is good, but there are no guarantees."

"What's the rehab time for a surgical repair?"

"It depends on the sport and type of injury, but up to a year before the athlete could return to full participation. You don't need surgery."

"No, but my friend Nicole does, the girl on whom I landed."

"A young woman is playing in a men's hockey league?"

"It's High School, and yes, she is. She's one of the fastest forwards and best shots in the league. Any checks other than hip checks are against the rules, so this kind of thing doesn't happen very often."

"How bad was her injury?"

"The ER doc said Grade 2. She's having a surgical evaluation today at Loyola."

"OK. Do you have any other questions?"

"No."

"Then I'll send the nurse in to wrap your knee and I'll see you a week from Friday."

"Thanks, Doc."

He left, and about two minutes later, a cute nurse came into the treatment room.

"Hi, Jesse!" she exclaimed. "I'm Gabriela. Doctor McCoy wants me to wrap your knee for you."

"Hi!" I replied. "What do you need me to do?"

"Sit on the exam table and slightly flex your knee," she said. "I'll explain what I'm doing so you or your mom or dad can replace it after a shower."

I moved, and she helped me position my knee, then began wrapping from the bottom in a criss-cross fashion, explaining as she went, and securing it with the Velcro sewn into the ends.

"You'll want to loosen this three times a day for about fifteen minutes," she said. "If your lower leg swells, you have the bandage wrapped too tightly. Got it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"How did you injure it?"

"Playing hockey," I replied. "My teammate and a player from the other team crashed into me, and all three of us went down."

"What position?"

"Goalie for Kenwood Academy. We were citywide champs this year."

"That's awesome! I didn't look at the chart and thought you were in college because you're so tall and muscular!"

"I turn seventeen on the 22nd," I said. "How long have you been a nurse?"

"It'll be a year in June," she replied.

"So you're only about five years older than the tall, muscular hockey player," I replied with a smile.

Gabriela laughed, "Are you hitting on me?"

"Do you want me to hit on you?" I asked with a goofy smile.

"You're a bit young for me, even if it's only five years."

"Age is a very poor way to judge maturity," I countered.

Gabriela laughed, "And you think you're mature?"

"I don't see a parent in the room! Do you? And I manage every aspect of my life by myself!"

"You're emancipated?"

"No, I have parents who believe teenagers are adults! Have coffee with me and judge for yourself!"

Gabriela laughed, "Seriously?"

"Seriously! I can't really go to Starbucks, but I can make you coffee or cocoa."

"And what will your parents say if an adult woman comes to visit you?"

I rolled my eyes, "I am an adult! My parents think so and treat me like one. What can having a cup of coffee or cocoa hurt?"

I picked up a pen and paper from the table next to the treatment bed, wrote my name and cell number on it, and handed it to her.

"It's up to you," I said, though I doubted she'd call because I was still underage.

"I'll, uhm, think about it," she replied. "You can put on your brace and your pants, and then go to reception."

"Thanks, Gabriela!" I said with a smile.

She laughed again, shook her head, and left the room. I put on the brace and my pants, then got off the table. I used the crutches to go to reception, where Mom One was waiting.

"All set?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I need an appointment a week from Friday for a checkup, and I'll need a ride to school at least until then."

Mom One acknowledged what I said and went to the receptionist to make the appointment because the rules required that, even though I could have done it myself. Once that was done, we made our way out to her car. Once she helped me in, I buckled up, then dialed Dad's mobile number.

"Steve Adams' phone," a female voice said.

"Doctor Mary, right?"

"Yes. Is this Jesse?"

"Yes. I assume my dad is being poked, prodded, or magnetized at the moment?"

"He's in the MRI and will attract all metal near him!"

"Especially if it's being worn by a nurse!" I declared.

"You might have a point! How is your knee?"

"It's a Grade 1 sprain, and I don't need surgery, just rest and rehab."

"Good. Any other message for your dad?"

"No. He can call later, but nothing has changed since Saturday. I'll see him tomorrow night when he comes home and let him know about the neuro check."

"Every Adams male needs their head examined!" Doctor Mary declared.

I laughed, "I can't argue with that."

We said 'goodbye', and I closed my phone and slipped it back into my pocket.

"Is there anything you need at the store?" Mom One asked.

"No. I think we have everything I need at home. Are you going to work?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll just hang out in the main house because I can use the elevator to get to Albert's room to use his computer or game consoles."

"Sounds good."

[Rochester, Minnesota]

 Steve

"As I understand it, the latest working theory is dopamine?" Doctor Clara Brown asked when I met with her late on Monday afternoon following my medical tests.

"Yes, though it's highly speculative, and it's not entirely clear that my behavior is reward-motivated the way it's usually represented in the media."

Doctor Brown laughed, "It's all about the orgasms?"

"Or Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. I assume you know that particular euphemism?"

"Obviously! Do you know about motivational salience?"

"I did some research with help from Jess. The basis for thinking it might be dopamine is that it reduces insulin production, which could explain my sensitivity to complex carbohydrates. The counter-argument is that it inhibits norepinephrine, but mostly I don't show the symptoms of either excess or deficiency. Nobody would say I'm hyperactive, especially when I'm coding or reading."

"Have you noticed ebbs and flows in your sexual activity? Or any cyclical behavior?"

"Nothing cyclical, and the ebbs and flows are really only about new partners, and more often than not, that's intentional."

"You still have five regular partners, right?"

"Yes. My wives and my girlfriends."

"And new partners?"

"Fairly consistent, though I intend to have an ebb cycle, which might stay that way for some time, or even long-term."

"Did something happen?"

"I'm getting older," I chuckled. "No dysfunction, but I'm at a point where my preferred partners are less available and are likely to continue to be."

"Have your preferences changed at all?"

"Not really."

"Sixteen to nineteen?"

"Roughly. It's also the case that social views on teenagers are changing for the worse, as we've described."

"How do you feel about aging?"

"It doesn't bother me, and the only reason I mentioned it is because the age gap is now sufficiently large that I'm 'too old' for girls I'd like to be with, given the opportunity."

"When you say no dysfunction, what does that mean?"

"Just what I've said. My initial refractory period is largely unchanged from when I was a teenager and is roughly ten to fifteen minutes, though, on occasion, I've had much shorter times. I can usually have six or seven orgasms before the refractory period becomes long enough that I need an extended rest period. Again, there have been times when it's been as many as eight with no long rest periods."

"Nice marketing job!" Doctor Brown declared.

"And a wasted one, given I'm a patient!"

"Any changes in preferred activities?" Doctor Brown asked.

"No. I still strongly prefer either missionary or lotus position sex, as well as giving and receiving oral sex. Nothing has changed since the last time we spoke in that regard. The extremes are still anal and light bondage, but light bondage bothers me."

"Because you've had friends who were raped."

"Yes."

"Do you have any unfulfilled fantasies?" Doctor Brown asked.

"Jennifer Jason Leigh from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High!*"

Doctor Brown laughed, "Any that you *could* fulfill if the circumstances presented themselves? I mean, without Doc Brown's DeLorean time machine?"

"No. There's the ongoing teasing with my friend Kathy, but she and I were together in High School and during our first year in college. Believe it or not, actresses don't really do anything for me, and most girls I want to sleep with are available."

"I take it from that that you avail yourself of those opportunities?"

"Within the rules agreed with my wives, yes. And those rules aren't really restrictive, and certain exceptions are permitted."

"What rules are in force now?"

"Nobody who works for me, which is inviolable. Nobody who works at the hospital or the university, though there can be rare exceptions. Those need approval in advance, as do overnights when it would take me away from my wives or girlfriends. For those overnights where I do need an exception, the girl needs to ask my wives."

Doctor Brown laughed, "And, of course, they do, right?"

"Yes. The same is true for more than two encounters. I have a few long-term relationships besides the official girlfriends, but those were discussed and approved beforehand."

"How many active lovers do you have?"

"If you count the occasional 'when we see each other' encounters, around fifteen."

"You're still rigorous about STI testing, right?"

"Yes. It's the most important rule of all."

"Have you had any manic or depressive incidents since I last saw you?"

"No. Diet, exercise, sufficient sleep, and copious amounts of sex keep everything on an even keel."

"And if you miss any of those?"

"One night of poor sleep isn't a concern, nor are short periods of abstinence or missing a day or two of exercise. Violating my diet is a serious concern, so I'm fastidious about it. On those very, very rare occasions I don't eat right, I take fast-acting propranolol. That protects against any manic episodes that might occur from eating too many carbs."

"When was the last time that happened?"

"Right before Christmas," I replied. "My flight was extensively delayed, and the only food available had more carbs than I'm allowed. I took the propranolol prophylactically before I ate. I had no negative effects."

"Your other symptoms included poor judgment. Any incidents?"

"That depends on who you ask, but my wives do not believe so."

"May I ask?"

"I developed an online relationship with a young woman who was seeking some very specific fantasies, and shortly after I refused, she was murdered."

"What fantasies?"

"The role play was the virginal teenage babysitter seducing the dad when he drove her home. The non-role play was losing her virginity tied spread-eagled to a bed."

"She was a virgin?"

"She claimed to be. She wanted the bondage fantasy first, then the role-play. I declined because it was too close to rape, and you know my history there with my friends."

"What happened?"

"She came to my house, revealed the fantasy, and I declined. She chose to leave, so I put her in a cab for Union Station. I paid the cabbie, then went back inside. She was found dead, having been murdered that night after she left my house. I don't know more details because the police are playing it close to the vest. They checked my alibi, and it was ironclad and airtight."

"Have you met other people online?"

"Yes. This is the first time it's gone wrong."

"You don't find it risky?"

"No. Of course, I've been using online services since the mid-80s, before the internet existed."

"Do you engage in any other risky behavior?"

"Skydiving in the past, but I stopped after my concussions. Doctor Kirilenko cleared me to do that if I wanted, but I think I got it out of my system, because I don't really have any desire to do it again."

"Do you have a desire to engage in risky behavior?"

"I don't think so. I'm very happy with my family, my company is very successful, my sex life is great, my friends are great, the dōjō is great, and I'm able to travel. That's pretty much the sweet spot for me. All that's missing is grandkids, but I have a few years to wait for those."

"Where do you struggle?"

"I honestly don't at this point. Life is good, I'm content, and the challenges are ones I enjoy facing."

"What challenges?"

"Work, raising children, and keeping my marriage on an even keel. But I'm able to meet all of those."

"You do seem to have everything together. I don't think we need to meet when you're here in the Fall unless there's some specific difficulty with your sex life."

"Thanks, Doctor," I said.

"I'll call for the med student to come get you."

"I think I can find my way back to Mary's office."

"OK."

We shook hands, and I left her office and made my way back to Mary's office, where I found her with Doctor Ross and her medical student, Jing.

"Come in," Mary said. "We're just going over your lab results."

"Does anything differ from the baseline?"

"It probably won't surprise you that your TSH is high."

"No, it doesn't. I expected thyroid problems at some point. How high?"

"High enough that we're recommending 25mg of levothyroxine daily. Have you noticed your hands and feet being cold?"

"No more than normal, that is to say, occasionally during the winter. I think it sounds reasonable. What are the side effects of levothyroxine?"

"You owe me \$20!" Mary declared, looking at Doctor Ross.

"Not yet!" Doctor Ross said. "The side effects are potential weight loss, trouble tolerating heat, sweating, anxiety, trouble sleeping, tremors, and fast heart rate. That's why we're starting with a low dose. It takes about six weeks for your TSH to level out, so you'll have blood drawn at the end of April so we can see if the dosage is correct."

"From that list, trouble sleeping and tremors concern me. Trouble sleeping is a concern for the obvious reason that would create a terrible choice for me -- risk an imbalance in my personality versus any negative effects of hypothyroidism. The tremors for the reason they could interfere with typing and with karate. I need to know how much of a risk those are."

"Typically only for too high a dose. 25mg is fairly low, but if you're overly concerned, we can go with 25mg every other day and see what happens. You aren't showing any symptoms yet, so that's a reasonable approach. It's also the case that stopping levothyroxine or lowering the dose resolves the symptoms."

"I'd like to discuss it with Jessica and Al," I replied. "Barring contrary advice, I'll start with 25mg every other day, and if that doesn't bring my TSH levels down in six weeks, then I'll begin taking it daily."

"Draw," Doctor Ross said to Mary.

"You two are hilarious," I said with a smile. "Was it an actual bet?"

"After a fashion," Doctor Ross replied. "I'm sure you know from Jessica and Al that we discuss cases in detail, and nearly always, in cases where we suspect a patient might have a concern about treatment, we discuss options and how we'll handle it."

"In your case, you're much more informed than the typical patient, which changes the dynamic a bit. It's not that we hide things, but most patients accept medical judgment and agree to do what the doctor recommends, even if they don't actually follow through."

"Mary felt that given the family history, you'd accept the prescription. I felt you'd be more concerned about side effects and might reject it out of hand. You neatly split the difference by asking questions and expressing your concerns. Neither of us felt you'd agree then not follow through."

"All you have to do is let Birgit know, and you can be sure I'll do it!" I chuckled. "For some unknown reason, and strangely for a teenage daughter, she wants to keep me around!"

Both Mary and Jing laughed, and Doctor Ross shook his head.

"My two daughters had zero use for me from about twelve to seventeen. My son was never like that."

"Sounds like me and my dad," Mary replied. "He was FAR too concerned about my social life."

"You should have Chinese parents, Doctor Whittaker!" Jing lamented. "I'm in my last year of medical school, and my dad STILL wants to control who I socialize with!"

"That's OK, Jing," I replied. "My mom felt she could control my life for my entire life and still feels that way, which is why we're mostly estranged. I get along with my dad just fine, but my mom? Nope."

"He's not kidding," Mary interjected. "Anyway, back to medicine. We don't want to make too many changes at once, so no modifications to anything except the levothyroxine every other day. The kids should all have TSH levels taken for a baseline."

"I'll let the moms know," I replied. "Anything else to watch out for?"

"No. You can have the labs done at the hospital and have them send them to me."

"Don's Livery Service!" Mary's husband said, coming into the office.

"He's ready to go," Mary said. "Steve, we'll see you back here in August."

"Thanks, Mary," I replied. "Thanks, Doctor Ross. Nice to have met you, Jing. Good luck with the Match."

"Thanks!"

I shook hands with all of them, then Don and I left the office and headed to his car. Ten minutes later, he dropped me at the Marriott. I thanked him for the ride, we shook hands, and I headed into the hotel. I went up to my room, took a quick shower, and put on clean clothes. I had just finished when my mobile phone rang.

"Steve Adams."

"Hi! It's Anna. We're all checked in."

"Great! I just finished my shower after a full day of medical tests. What did you want to do?"

"Dinner? If you know a place, feel free to suggest one."

"There's a midscale place just north of the hotel at 1st Avenue and Center that my doctor recommended. My treat."

"Thanks! Meet in the lobby in ten minutes?"

"Great!"

We ended the call, and I called Jessica's mobile so I could speak to her without being intercepted by a certain daughter who would demand a full report before I spoke to the doctor in the family.

"Hi, Tiger! What did Mary have to say?"

"My TSH levels are high, which should come as no surprise. She and Doug Ross prescribed 25mg of levothyroxine every other day. They want my TSH levels in six weeks to see if they need to adjust the dosage."

"That's a very low dose."

"We negotiated from daily to every other day. I'm concerned about the possible side effects of tremors or sleep difficulty. We'll slowly ramp up the dosage if necessary. I'm not having any symptoms, so they were amenable to starting slow. Mary and Doug suggested the kids all have a baseline TSH level recorded."

"That makes sense. What about the dopamine theory?"

"Doug and Mary want to do one thing at a time, which makes sense, given nobody knows for sure what's causing my hormone imbalances."

"That makes sense in your case. Have you spoken to my dad?"

"No. I figured if you agreed, there was no point in consulting him. He'll receive the full report from Mayo, as will Mike. Did you speak with Jesse?"

"Yes. He said he called and spoke to Mary. Did he tell you the name of the doctor?"

"No."

"McCoy."

I laughed, "Damn it, Jesse, I'm a doctor, not a bricklayer!"

"I believe that's what he said when Jesse first heard his name. He has his neuro check tomorrow, but Dad and I both think he's clear."

"Good. I'm about to head to dinner with Anna Wilson and her friend Angie. See you tomorrow!"

"See you tomorrow. Are you going to speak to the kids?"

"After dinner. I just wanted to make sure you heard what Mary and Doug said right away."

"I appreciate it. I'll let Kara and Suzanne know."

"Thanks."

We said 'goodbye', and after I closed the phone, I headed down to the lobby to meet Anna and Angie. I only had to wait about two minutes before they came up to me, and immediately, I noticed something different about Angie. She seemed animated, and her gait was normal, unlike how she'd been when I'd met her in Milford. I wondered if they'd found a new dose or even a new medication that didn't have the same side effects.

"Hi!" Anna said and gave me a quick hug.

"Hi!" I replied. "Hi, Angie."

"Hi, Steve!" she said brightly.

That was VERY different from her slow speech in Milford when I'd compared her to a computer where the CPU clock rate was slowed down.

"We can walk," I said. "It's only about two blocks, and it's not ridiculously cold outside."

"Sure," Anna agreed. "Have they discovered anything?"

"Just my Thyroid Stimulating Hormone being a bit high," I said as we began walking. "That was basically expected at some point because my mom had thyroid problems. Otherwise, no changes, though the full EEG-MRI results won't be ready for a day or two."

"That's the test I'm having," Angie said. "Well, along with some others, but that's the main one."

I wanted to ask more but wasn't sure I should, as I barely knew Angie.

"How's work?" I asked Anna.

"Good. I was promoted again, so now I manage my group."

"That's great. How are the boys?"

"OK. They're with Gina and her family while I'm here. How are things with you?"

"Work and karate keep me busy, and the family is as crazy as it's always been!"

"Your life was always a bit crazy and very complicated."

"Anna explained about your family," Angie said. "It's, uhm, different."

"That's one way to put it," I chuckled.

"My friend Mike has a baby with his friend similar to your oldest son."

"I know Mike," I said. "He and my wife Jessica are friends. They first met when he visited Indiana University when he was considering medical schools."

"So you've met Clarissa?"

"Yes. The first time was in Hawai'i when we were at a wedding."

"So you know Brandon and Kimiko, then, right?"

"Yes. Kimiko is the sister of my «Shihan». I'm a 6th Dan in that school, but in Chicago."

We reached the restaurant, and the hostess seated us immediately. A waiter came over and took our drink orders, which for me was sparkling water with lime.

"I need to use the ladies'," Angie said. "I'll be right back."

She got up and walked towards the restrooms.

"She's different," I said. "New medication?"

"No medication. She's at Mayo because of what the doctors are all calling a medical miracle."

"Is it OK to ask?"

"She was diagnosed with schizophrenia in college and has been on medication pretty much consistently since around 1983. You saw how she was in Milford, and that's how she had mostly been since around 1990, when there was a problem with her treatment that really messed her up. For the last thirteen years or so, they managed her condition, but it made her feel like she was in a fog.

"Anyway, back in October, her appendix burst, and she developed peritonitis. She was in the hospital for two weeks on a high-dose antibiotic cocktail. About halfway through, suddenly, her cognitive abilities all came back, and there was no sign of her schizophrenia. They weaned her from all the drugs, and she didn't relapse.

"She's here because they want to see if there's any difference from an EEG-MRI that was performed ten years ago. She'll also meet with a team of psychiatrists because she wants the State of Ohio to grant emancipation, which is almost impossible to achieve for someone diagnosed with schizophrenia. She managed to get her driver's license last month, which was the first big step."

"Wow! I'm no expert, obviously, but you don't just suddenly get better from schizophrenia. Was it a missed diagnosis?"

"They don't think so. Something about the illness, the surgery, the anesthesia, or the antibiotic cocktail seems to have cured her, though they want five years before they will say she's cured. She has an attorney fighting with the State of Ohio and, of course, several doctors on her side, including Doctor Mercer and Mike Loucks."

"Is she seeing Doug Ross?"

"Yes. Is that your doctor?"

"Yes, along with Mary Whittaker. Changing subjects, are you dating?"

"Single mom, age forty? Not exactly a prime candidate."

"You're still a beautiful woman," I said.

"At least you didn't use that stupid 'as the day I met you' line!"

"The opinions of my daughters and some female friends to the contrary notwithstanding, I'm not a *complete* idiot!"

"I have been on a few dates, but nothing to write home about, so to speak."

Angie came back, which meant including her in the conversation.

"You're 6th Dan?" she asked. "Shōtōkan, right?"

"Yes."

I practice Aikidō, and I'm 1st Dan."

"One of my students began in Aikidō," I replied.

"You're an instructor?"

"I was awarded the title 錬士 (*Renshi*), or Polished Instructor."

"That's quite an achievement."

"Thanks."

The waiter came to take our orders and went to put them in with the kitchen.

"Anna says you run a computer company of some kind," Angie said.

That kicked off a long conversation about my past, with Anna and Angie relating some of theirs, though I knew quite a bit of Anna's from when we had dated. The conversation lasted all the way through dinner and coffee afterwards, as I opted

to skip dessert as there was nothing even remotely reasonable for me to have on the menu.

When we finished our coffee, I paid the check, leaving a generous tip on the table. We made our way back to the hotel, I said 'good night' to both women and promised to keep in touch with Anna. Once I was back in my room, I called home to talk to the kids and my wives. I spoke to Jesse last, and asked him about his medical visit.

"Not much more than what I told Doctor Mary," he said. "Well, except for flirting with the cute nurse."

I laughed, "Like father, like son! You have your neuro check tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. Grandpa Al said Doctor Carver would check me. I think he checked you, right?"

"Yes, when they were trying to find the source of my syncope."

"Penguin heads are full of blubber!"

"Watch it, lame Little Duck!" I growled.

Jesse and I both laughed.

"I'll see you late tomorrow afternoon. No need to try to call me with an update."

"OK, Pops! Do you need to speak to anyone else?"

"Nope."

We said 'goodbye', I hung up, then pulled out my laptop to answer emails. I spent about twenty minutes doing that, then checked the bug tracking system to see what would be waiting for me on Wednesday morning. There was only one new bug, and it wasn't rated 'blocking', so I didn't look further into it. I shut down my computer and pulled out *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* by Orlando Figes, a book Natalie had strongly recommended.

I read for about an hour until I was interrupted by a knock at the door. I put the book down, got up, and went to answer it.

"Hi," Anna said.

I was slightly surprised to see her, though as I thought about it, I was probably reading more into it than I should, given her historical insistence on monogamy and fidelity.

"Hi," I replied.

"May I come in?"

"Sure. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I wouldn't mind a glass of wine, but I suspect you don't drink, given your restrictions."

"I do, occasionally, but mostly bourbon. Distilled liquor is metabolized differently from fermented liquor. There might be some individual bottles in the minibar, and you're welcome to one if you want."

"Sure," she said.

I checked and let her know what was available. She chose a merlot, and I decided to have some Maker's Mark. I opened the bottles, poured them into lowball glasses, and took them to the table. We both sat down and sipped our drinks.

"Where's Angie?"

"She has her own room. A year ago, that could never have happened. Now, she's like she was when I first met her when we were fourteen. She was kind of quirky during our Senior year, which was probably the first sign of her illness, but even those quirks are gone. She's always been frustrated with her situation, but as you can imagine, it's worse now."

"I believe it. How much freedom does she have?"

"Some. Her parents make her medical decisions, but they always defer to Mike, who listens to Angie. Her license allows her to drive in the daytime only, which took quite a fight to make happen. Mike and his stepdad, who's an attorney, fought the State of Ohio and won that concession. The biggest restriction is she can't even go on a date because she was declared *non compos mentis*. Even a single romantic kiss would be considered sexual assault."

"I recall you saying she wanted to be a mom and a wife," I replied. "I'd guess physiology would stop the biological mom part, but she could marry and adopt."

"Marry? Probably, if Mike and his stepdad win the battle. Adoption is unlikely because of her history. They won't risk it."

"You're probably right. Do they have any idea at all what happened?"

"None. The main suspicion is the general anesthesia somehow rewired her brain; Mike thinks it might have something to do with the antibiotic cocktail they gave

her because she nearly died of sepsis. Clarissa suspects Angie's immune response did something. In other words, no idea at all except pure speculation."

"So, in a sense, she's in the same boat I'm in -- nobody knows what caused her condition to resolve, while nobody knows what caused mine to begin. The speculation for me is some kind of congenital defect in my hypothalamus, but they can't say for sure. How is Kyle doing?"

"Graduated, married, and a baby on the way in about five months!"

"That's awesome. Where's he working?"

"For a sports agent in Cincinnati as assistant office manager. Veronica teaches kindergarten."

"I strongly suspect he didn't convince her to allow him two wives," I chuckled.

"You know her?"

"Only by name. He mentioned her when I ran into him at the diner in Newtown and joked about it. I advised him that it was a tough path."

"You seem to have managed it."

"Not without quite a bit of hard work and more than a little heartache. Things have finally stabilized."

"But have you changed?"

"If you mean my view on relationships? No. That was always your sticking point. And that was true for quite a few girls over the years."

"You're implying you still behave that way."

"I do have the freedom to manage my sex life as I see fit. There are some basic rules, but it's always up to me."

"I still find it difficult to understand, but it seems to be working well for you."

"It is. And, as I said, that was the thing that prevented us from being together."

"When I showed up at your door, did you expect me to sleep with you?"

"Actually, my immediate thought was the opposite -- that given our history and your views on monogamy, that wasn't the reason for your visit. I assumed you simply wanted to continue our private conversation. Nothing you've said or done has caused me to change my thinking."

"Hypothetically speaking, if that's what I had wanted, what would happen?"

"Twenty-five years later, I still don't do hypotheticals. I maintain that until it's real, any answer that's given is provisional at best. And I absolutely refuse to answer 'What if?' questions about the past, except in the rarest of circumstances."

"What do you mean?"

"Something like you asking what might have happened if you were OK with my lifestyle choices or if you hadn't become angry with me or any other question that requires something in the past to change. The problem with those questions is not just that they are speculative but that there is simply no way to know what might have happened if that thing changed because of what I'd call a ripple effect. You simply can't know what else would have changed, and it's illogical to assume you could change just that one thing."

Anna considered for a moment, then nodded.

"That does make sense," she replied. "Obviously, if you married a different person, your entire life would change."

"Precisely."

"But what's the difference in saying you want to do something versus asking the other person how they'd respond to you wanting to do something. Don't you do that in business planning?"

"Absolutely. But I also try to gather as much information as possible to avoid as much speculation as possible. If I can obtain actual information to act on, that's always better. By saying that I don't like hypotheticals, I'm actually asking for information. My other problem with them is that they can be insincere and imply things that aren't true.

"You asked me, hypothetically, what would happen if you wanted to go to bed with me. For most people, that would imply you *did* want to go to bed, and could lead to the guy being upset that the offer wasn't real. And that might lead the girl to do something she hadn't intended because she didn't want the guy to be upset.

"It's FAR better to just say what you want or simply ask a direct question. Think about the difference between 'If, hypothetically, I wanted to go to bed with you, what would happen?' and 'Do you want to go to bed with me?'. It might seem subtle, but the first implies you want to; the second one does not. Do you see that?"

"Weirdly, I do. Out of curiosity, what are the rules?"

"The one that would apply here is a mandatory one -- a recent clean STI test."

"I have one."

"Then you're free to ask, and I'll answer."

Anna smiled, "Do you want to love me, screw me, and fuck me?"

XXX. A Truly Small World

February 10, 2003, Rochester, Minnesota

 Steve

Anna had used those words the day she'd given me her virginity when we were fifteen. She'd used them again when we'd reconnected during our Senior years after I'd returned home from Sweden. The last time I'd been with her had been a few years later when we'd concluded we didn't have a future together. Our interactions after that had been limited and mostly negative because of the choices I'd made about how to live my life. I'd promised her a direct answer, and I'd give one, but I wouldn't fulfill that request until we'd talked about it.

"I do," I replied. "You don't have to answer, obviously, but why the change of attitude?"

"Brutal honesty?"

"That tends to work well with me."

"I haven't been with anyone since Gerry and I separated. My divorce was final back in September, and I'm horny. I've been with you before, you're available, and it can literally be just great, uncomplicated, uninhibited sex."

"That's quite the change from when we were dating."

"Except that first time after you came back from Sweden," Anna said.

"That didn't turn out so well," I observed.

"It didn't, but the sex was hot. With Gerry, it was more like when you and I were dating."

"You're sure this is what you want?" I asked.

"I want to start with nice, slow, sensual lovemaking for old time's sake, followed by giving you a blowjob, after which you fuck me senseless, doing anything you want, with no limits."

"You're sure about that?"

"Positive."

"How much sleep do you need?"

"None!"



February 11, 2003, Rochester, Minnesota

In the end, we only got about ninety minutes of sleep because Anna had to meet Angie for breakfast. It had been a night of pure pleasure for both of us, and Anna had enthusiastically lost her final cherry, meaning I'd gotten all of them over the years.

"Think you could manage one more?" Anna asked as we stepped into the large shower stall."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Under the spray, with me in your lap, kissing softly."

"The lotus position," I replied. "Or what a young woman dubbed the 'adulting' position."

Anna laughed softly, "Cute. Teenager?"

"Eighteen, but that was ten years ago. I'm game if you are."

Anna smiled, dropped to her knees, and used her mouth to get me hard, which took a bit of time after I'd cum seven times before we'd fallen asleep. Once I was hard, I sat down, crossed my legs, and Anna sat in my lap with her legs around me. She lifted up, grasped my shaft, and held it while she slid slowly down, engulfing me in her silky folds.

We kissed softly as Anna ground against me and raised and lowered her body, bringing herself off three times before lifting off, bending down, and taking me in her mouth. She stroked, bobbed, sucked, and licked until I came, then French kissed me without having swallowed, something she'd first done when we'd reconnected and had done after the blowjob she had given me the previous evening.

"You're a very sexy woman," I said as we quickly washed, having used up most of our time having sex.

"And you're a handsome guy. I broke my cardinal rule, but I have no regrets."

"Sleeping with a married man?"

"Yes. I've actually only been with one other guy besides you and Gerry. I hope you won't be upset if I say I probably won't break that rule ever again."

"I understand completely," I replied. "I'm glad you made the exception."

"Me, too."

We finished in the shower, dried off, and dressed. I walked her to the door, where we exchanged a soft kiss.

"Keep in touch," I said.

"I will!"

She left, and I went back to bed, setting my alarm for 10:00am.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

On Tuesday, after lunch, Aunt Jessica took me to the hospital for my neuro check with Doctor Carver.

"How are you feeling, Jesse?" Doctor Carver asked, coming into the exam room with Grandpa Al.

"My knee hurts a bit, but I've been taking Advil. Otherwise, no complaints. The headache went away and I never saw double or had blurry vision."

"Any trouble remembering things?"

"Only what happened from the time Tomás and Nicole crashed into me until I came to."

"How long was that?"

"Maybe thirty seconds; I don't know for sure. I was dazed for a bit after I came to, but Tomás said it was about thirty seconds."

"What exams were done?" he asked.

"Doctor Anders made sure neither of us had neck injuries, the paramedics checked us out with penlights and their fingers, and then a neurologist examined me in the Emergency Department."

"Any nausea?"

"No."

"Any trouble waking up yesterday or today?"

"No, though I slept later than usual."

"What time do you usually get up?"

"About 4:00am because of hockey practice. I slept until 9:00am yesterday and today."

"How many hours of sleep?"

"About eleven. I usually get about eight when I have hockey practice, nine on weekends."

"Any personality changes, Jess?"

"He's his usual self," Aunt Jessica said.

"Which is enough to give ME a brain injury!" Grandpa Al declared.

"On that note, let's do a complete neuro physical."

He checked my heart and lungs, then my ears, eyes, nose, and mouth, checked my neck and my distal pulses, then performed a Babinski test and a neuropathy test.

"Flying colors," Doctor Carver said. "Jesse, if you develop a headache, besides your sisters, or have any vision problems, let Jessica know right away. Sometimes concussions have late-onset symptoms."

I laughed, "Only one of them is a headache at the moment; I just avoid her. I'll let Aunt Jess know if I have any symptoms."

"You're cleared to go back to school tomorrow. I'll write a note for you. No restrictions at this point beyond the ones that McCoy gave you."

"No beaming down to planets with hot green chicks! Check!"

Doctor Carver laughed, "We do tease him about that."

"Do they tease you about being a neurosurgeon with the surname 'Carver'?"

"All the time! A friend of mine in Ohio has the last name Cutter. He was a general surgeon. They had an oncology doctor whose last name was Sabey, who they called 'Chemo'."

I groaned. "That's bad."

"And a Doctor Casper whose nickname was 'Ghost'."

"That's not as bad as the *Lone Ranger* nickname. What do they call Aunt Jess?"

"AND ON THAT NOTE, we're out of here!" Aunt Jessica declared, causing the other two doctors to laugh.

"No need for a follow-up unless you have further symptoms. Take it easy for the rest of the day, OK?"

"OK," I agreed. "Thanks, Doctor."

He wrote out a note for school, gave it to Aunt Jess, and we left the exam room. The crutches were a pain in the butt, but the last thing I wanted to do was damage my knee further, so I was following Doctor McCoy's instructions carefully. Aunt Jess took me home, then returned to the hospital. Yuriko made lunch for me, and after I ate, I used the elevator to go up to Albert's room to play video games.

I had played for about ninety minutes when Yuriko let me know that Missy had arrived with my assignments. I made my way downstairs via the elevator and met her in the sunroom.

"Can your leg handle our usual Tuesday activities?" she asked hopefully.

"I'm supposed to take it easy for the rest of the day," I said. "Next week should be OK."

"Bummer," Missy pouted. "But I understand. When will you be able to drive?"

"Not before a week from Friday," I replied. "That's when I have my next appointment for my knee."

"Well, that sucks! I suppose I'll go home and do my homework. Will you be in school tomorrow?"

"Yes."

She gave me a quick kiss, and after she left, I went to the coach house to do my homework, with Yuriko helpfully carrying my books and papers for me. I had just started when my mobile phone rang.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Jesse, this is Coach Nelson. How are you?"

"Good, Coach. No neuro problems, and the doctor confirmed I have a Grade 1 sprain. I have to keep it wrapped, iced, and elevated. I can go to school tomorrow using crutches, and my next appointment is a week from Friday to start my rehab plan."

"What did the doctor say about playing?"

"We'll know in early May," I replied. "He did say I could coach at hockey camp, but he won't commit to playing for eight weeks."

"It sounds as if you'll be ready to go in the Fall."

"I expect to. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks. Is it OK to share all of this with Doctor Anders?"

"Yes."

"See you at school."

We said 'goodbye', and I ended the call. Before I could start my homework, Birgit, Ashley, and their friends from the Lab School came into the house to check on me.

"Do you need anything, Jesse?" Chadrima said sweetly.

She was trying to flirt but in a little girl's way. It was cute, but she was only twelve.

"Missy brought my homework," I replied. "So everything is good. I appreciate the offer."

She beamed, and I knew I'd said exactly the right thing.

"Did the neurologist confirm you're a bird brain?" Birgit asked with a smirk.

"At least I don't need a proctologist for a brain scan like a certain sister!"

"He's not wrong!" Ashley declared mirthfully.

"What did I do to deserve this abuse?" Birgit asked.

"Be born?" Tiffany teased.

"HEY!" I protested. "Who decided this was National Pick on Birgit Day?"

"That's *every* day!" I said with a goofy grin.

Birgit rolled her eyes, and then she, Ashley, and their friends left, though Zahra stayed behind to get a kiss before she joined the others. Once she had gone out the door, I returned to working on my homework.

 Steve

My flight from Rochester to Chicago was uneventful, and the seat next to me had been empty. When I arrived at Midway, I headed straight for my car, and ten minutes after deplaning, I was in my BMW. I had just pulled out of the parking lot when my mobile phone rang. I flipped it open, pressed the button to accept the call then put it on speaker.

"Steve Adams."

"Steve, it's Mike Knox."

"Hi, Mike. Perfect timing because I just got back to Chicago. What's up?"

"Windy City Taxi is looking to settle the case as quickly and as quietly as possible."

"Which will make life more difficult for Jonathan and me. I assume they won't admit liability?"

"Correct. I don't have any idea as to what kind of settlement they'll offer, but Nelson Boyd is obviously concerned."

"I'm going to speak with Jonathan and see if we can come up with a strategy."

"Given the two of you both agreed to sink or swim together, I don't see a problem with that."

"Thanks, Mike. What's the next step?"

"A motion to dismiss. Nelson and I are working on that. Our goal is to get before the judge in advance of any settlement agreement. If Windy City Taxi wants to settle, we'll do our best to leave them holding the bag."

"What grounds?"

"Initially, the fact that the police refuse to release information critical to the defense. Julius and I spoke to the detectives, and they flat-out refused. The State's Attorney informed us they'll fight any subpoena request until the investigation is complete, and they'll very likely block us. We'll ask for dismissal, but without prejudice, which has a better chance of being granted because they could refile once the records are available."

"Would there be a problem if we did our own investigation?"

"The cops will hate you, but so long as the investigator is licensed in Illinois, no problem."

"Thanks. Keep me posted."

We ended the call, and I pulled over so I could scroll through my contact list to reach Jonathan.

"Kane."

"Steve Adams. I assume your attorney told you the same thing Mike told me?"

"He did."

"Given the LEOs haven't made an arrest, what do you think of hiring our own investigators? We're going to need them if the CPD and DeKalb County Sheriff stonewall us on our subpoenas."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"Let me call Katy Anisimov at Global Security. They have several licensed investigators here."

Jonathan laughed, "You just dredged up an ancient memory. A friend's parents sent them after me trying to find her."

"It sounds as if your life might be as interesting as mine! Do you have a problem with them?"

"No, but the guy who was following me wasn't smart enough to follow a relatively clueless twenty-year-old me."

"If it was in the city, just using the subway, the Pedway, and L transfers would do it."

"Right the first time! I also had someone drive my car while I ducked out a different door."

"Katy didn't work for them at that point; she was too busy protecting the Soviet Trade Attaché, Ivan Voronin."

"You know him?"

"Know him? I dated his daughter, and there was a chance we'd marry. Do you know him?"

"I arranged a meeting and checked out one of their businesses in the mid-80s"

"Belarus Tractor," I replied.

Jonathan laughed again, "Samantha always said we were like two electrons orbiting the same nucleus."

"There's a third one -- Doctor Mike Loucks from Rutherford, Ohio."

"Code Blue?! And an ER doc?"

"One and the same. How do you know him?"

"We met once, but my mom knows him very well from when Code Blue played Goshen's Prom gigs."

"Very small world! I'll give Katy a call once I get home. I just came back from Mayo."

"Business?"

"No, medical. I've been playing 'stump the specialists' for over a decade."

"I bet I know a few other people you know. Jenny McGrath?"

"Saunders now, but yes. Let me guess, you were at the wedding?"

"I was. I also know Beverly Vaughn and her daughters Debbie and Tracey, though I haven't seen them in more than ten years now. And I met one of your wives, too."

"It had to be Kara."

"To this date, the most beautiful girl I've ever met in my life."

"You never got into karate?" I asked.

"Who told you about Keiko?"

"You ought to be able to guess. She kept everything she knew about you secret until four days ago."

"Stephanie Krajick, your little sister."

"Yes. She changed her name back to Adams after the divorce. We should get together and have a glass of bourbon. In fact, we should get together with Mike Loucks as well. Our universes have intersected in so many ways! I'm positive there are other people we all know."

"I suspect so. Talk to the investigator and let me know."

"Will do. Give me a day or two."

"No problem."

We said 'goodbye', and I ended the call. I decided to wait until I arrived home to call Katy, so I continued driving. Twenty-five minutes later, I walked in the door and was greeted by Birgit. I hugged her, and she took my overnight bag, and went upstairs while I went to the coach house to see Jesse.

"Hi, Pops!"

"Hi. What did the neurologist say?"

"No neural deficits. Aunt Jess and Grandpa Al were in the exam room. I'll need a ride to school until at least Friday of next week."

"Let your moms know that I'll take care of that."

"OK"

"Are you still planning your party on Friday?"

"Yes. Simone came by yesterday, and we discussed it. We'll be in the attic room, and I can use the elevator; I just won't be able to dance."

"How does the knee feel?"

"A dull ache, but ice, elevation, and Advil help."

"How is Nicole?"

"She needs surgery; she'll have it on Thursday and could be out for a year. That really messes up her chances at a scholarship. Aunt Jess knows the surgeon and says he's one of the best."

"Good. I'll give the Heaths a call later. Let me go say hi to the others, then I have a call to make."

I left the coach house and went to the main house and found Jess and Kara in the Indian room. I greeted them with hugs and kisses, then went to my study to call Katy Anisimov. The call went to her voicemail and I left a message asking her to call, then joined my wives in the Indian room.

"Anna spent the night last night," I said. "But that's not the important news -- Anna's friend Angie shows no signs of schizophrenia since she nearly died following a ruptured appendix that led to peritonitis."

"No way!" Jessica protested. "Not possible!"

"And yet," I countered. "She's having an EEG-MRI today along with a battery of tests and an interview with a team of pshrinkers."

"I need to call Mike!" Jessica declared.

"Before you do that, I also learned that our wife is holding out on us!"

"What?" Kara asked suspiciously.

"You've met Jonathan Kane!"

"The guy who helped find Samantha's dad?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember meeting him!"

"He remembers you! He said you were still the most beautiful girl he's ever met! He's not wrong!"

Kara smiled, "Thanks. He didn't say when?"

"No, but he mentioned Debbie V and her sister in the same context."

"I remember him vaguely from a funeral. He was at a dinner before the wake, and I spoke to him for about twenty seconds, I think. Then I saw him at the reception afterwards. Doctor Mercer and her family were there, too, along with Kent and Jennie Sanders. My mom was friends with all of them when they were in High School, though I think Jonathan's mom went to Goshen."

"A truly small world," I observed.

 Ashley

"He's such a hunk!" Chadrima declared. "I mean, to die for!"

"You do realize you're talking about my brother, right?" I asked.

"Duh! But that doesn't mean he's not hot!"

"Somebody got their period, didn't they?" Veronica asked.

"Obviously!" Susie declared.

"Besides Ashley, does anyone not agree?" Chadrima asked.

I rolled my eyes because Susie, Jasmine, Ellie, Chadrima, and Veronica all agreed. If Jesse wasn't with someone exclusively, he was going to have a crazy amount of fun in about four years. All my friends were starting to be boy-crazy, and while I was absolutely positive I'd want to, I wasn't in any rush.

"OK," I said. "That's settled. Should we get back to doing homework?"

"Party pooper!" Ellie teased.

 Steve

Katy called back just before dinner, which meant she'd just completed dinner, given she was in the Eastern Time zone.

"How are you, Stepa?" she asked after we greeted each other.

"Good. You?"

"Very good. How can I help you?"

I explained the situation and who was involved.

"I think a pair of investigators," she said. "Ted Farley, who you know, and a new investigator who was most recently an NCIS agent based in Japan -- Erica Barrett. She's originally from Chicago. She's available immediately; Ted is available next Monday."

"Thanks. Bill this through McCarthy/Jenkins so that the investigators are technically hired by them. I'll work things out with Jonathan on how to divvy up the costs."

"I'll take care of it! I'll have Ms. Barrett call you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Katy!"

We said 'goodbye', and I immediately dialed Jonathan's number.

"Kane."

"Steve Adams. I arranged for a pair of investigators from Global Security. One is a former NCIS agent, and the other is Ted Farley. The former agent will call me tomorrow. I'll make sure she knows everything I know, and I'll give her copies of the surveillance tapes I have."

"Good. Give her this number. I'll share what I know, but it's limited. There are no security cameras in the building, unfortunately."

"That is unfortunate. We'll talk again soon."

We ended the call, and I joined the family for dinner.



February 14, 2003, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"What's the plan for tonight?" I asked Jesse as I helped him into the car on Friday morning.

"About twenty of us, total, mostly from the hockey team and softball team, plus Birgit and her friend Fangsu who's dating Mitch."

"Is there anything you need me to do?" I asked as I got into the driver's seat.

"I don't think so. Birgit and Albert offered to help set up. He's going to hang out with the Kallas boys and some other guys."

I pulled out of the driveway and headed for Kenwood Academy.

"Did you hear from Nicole?" I asked.

"Mikey called last night. He said the surgery was successful, and she'll start rehab in two weeks. For the first month, it's leg-strengthening exercises using resistance, light weights, and a treadmill. That progresses to a step machine, then knee strengthening exercises. After four months, she can try to skate. She has to be able to do all the usual skills with her knee being stable and without pain. Best case scenario is she can play the last few games of next season."

"Does she have any options?"

"It's possible to arrange a private tryout, but by the time she can do that, the scholarships will have been awarded. Her option is to walk on and win a roster spot, then try to get a scholarship after Freshman year. Well, assuming she doesn't make a miraculous recovery."

"Did you want to visit her?"

"She's going home tomorrow morning. My moms are taking me to see her."

"Cool."

Tomás and DeShawn were waiting for Jesse at Kenwood Academy and helped him from the car, with Tomás taking Jesse's bag.

"I'll pick you up when school is out," I said. "Have a good day!"

"Thanks, Pops!"

DeShawn closed the door, and I pulled away from the curb, heading to the office.



Jesse

"Did you hear from Nicole?" Tomás asked.

"Her surgery was successful, and I'm going to see her tomorrow."

"Hi, Jesse!" Luna said, coming up to us. "How's the leg?"

"It feels better today, but I still won't be dancing tonight."

"I kinda figured," she replied. "Is it OK if Bonita comes to the party tonight?"

"Who's she?" I asked.

"She's my third cousin, and her family moved here from Mexico in December. She's fifteen and plays soccer."

"It's cool," I replied.

"Thanks."

"Who's the common relative for a third cousin?" DeShawn asked.

"We have the same great-great-grandparents," Luna replied. "Our entire extended family lived in the same village in southern Mexico until some moved to the US. My parents came here after they married, but before I was born. Bonita was obviously born in Mexico. What about you, Tomás?"

"My dad's parents moved here when he was a baby; my mom's family was in southern California for at least a hundred years, but I don't know too much about how they first moved there."

"Mine were transported from Gabon around 1820," DeShawn said. "What about you, Jesse?"

"On my mom's side, they came from Scotland just before the Civil War. On my dad's side, I'm not a hundred percent sure, but supposedly just after the Civil War. The German relatives on my dad's mom's side came over sometime around 1840."

We reached my locker, and Tomás helped me with my books, and we headed to homeroom to start the school day.

 Steve

Erica Barret, the private investigator, called me just before 10:00am.

"I spoke to a friend who is a CPD detective," she said. "Unofficially, they have no suspects and no leads. I did discover that she was dropped off at Burwood Tap on West Wrightwood Avenue, and the timing works that the cab took her straight there from your house. I'll go there tonight and see if I can find anyone who saw her. I also located a friend in DeKalb who provided fairly solid background material. There's nothing there yet, but I'm just getting started. I'll try to speak to the cabbie to find out how she ended up there."

"I'm going to guess she asked the cabbie about a bar," I said. "Which would explain why the cab company wants to settle quickly."

"I'd say that's good speculation," Erica said. "Let us keep working. I do have a lead on the boyfriend, though my contact indicated Nadia's parents didn't know about him."

"From what Nadia and Danielle said, it wasn't serious, which would fit the situation. Did the police speak to the friend or the boyfriend?"

"No. I found the friend by using her High School yearbook, finding pictures, and then tracking down the friend. I'm reasonably certain her parents didn't know this friend, and Danielle didn't."

"That raises some interesting questions."

"It does. You said she claimed she was a virgin; do you still believe that?"

I had the example of Jeri, who had claimed to be a virgin but was not, and I had absolutely no indication, only knowing much, much later when she'd confessed the subterfuge.

"Given there is no reliable way to know for certain if someone has not had sex, I have to trust the representation that she was."

"It's possible she lied about that to entice you into doing something she knew you were reluctant to do. That would make it as much role-play as her babysitter fantasy. But it only worked if you weren't aware she was role-playing."

"Possible," I replied.

"It's also possible there was some other motivation, and that's what I'll try to uncover. The LEOs don't really care about why, and I don't think they're looking past what you've told them and what they can discern from her online chats. I'm reasonably certain there is more in her chats than you or her friend Danielle know."

"Entirely possible," I replied.

"I'll check in with you next week. Ted will take the DeKalb portion and I'll stick with the Chicago portion, and obviously, we'll work together."

"Thanks."

We ended the call, and I dialed Mike Knox at McCarthy/Jenkins. I related what Erica Barret had reported.

"That's actually very good for us," Mike said. "If the cabbie deviated from the fare you paid, a motion to dismiss has a much better chance of success. If Windy City Taxi does settle, that actually helps you. As for Mr. Kane, they're going to have to prove that the building was somehow unsafe or that he did something other than passively own the property. Everything I know so far indicates the building was properly secured and that while Yuusuke Holdings, Mr. Kane's LLC, does hold the title, the property is managed by a third party."

"That's good news all around," I replied. "And explains why Windy City Taxi would want to settle quickly and quietly. Why wasn't the bar named?"

"The only reason I can think of is the parents don't know. It was never in the papers, and until Ms. Barret uncovered it via her contact, whoever that was, it was closely held. My advice for the moment is to sit tight. Nelson Boyd and I will file the motion on Monday morning. We had planned to do it today, but I want to add the additional information you provided about the drop-off point."

"What's the basic argument?"

"That given the known facts, it would be impossible for you to have any kind of culpability based on their claims. They'll likely be offered a chance to amend them, but the new information puts them in a tough situation. I'll send Liz a copy when we file."

"Thanks."

I ended the call and left the «yōshitsu» room where I'd gone for privacy.

"Why the skullduggery?" Penny asked.

"In a civil case, they could depose you and ask you about anything I said to my attorney or the investigator, and privilege wouldn't apply."

"How does that work with the investigator? They aren't attorneys."

"It'll be billed through McCarthy/Jenkins, so it's work product."

"You seem to know every angle! Now, if I could just get you interested in curves!"

"I am interested in curves, and I know yours very well! They just have to be observed from a distance!"

"You're no fun, Steve! Just no fun!"

"Get back to work, Pretty Penny!" I said, then kissed her on the cheek

She smiled and her fingers once again began dancing over the keys of her keyboard.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"We have less than four weeks to go until opening night," Mr. Fruits said in drama class on Friday afternoon. "That means you should be able to say your lines without the script by the end of next week."

"He means you," I said quietly to Tara, who was playing Golde opposite my Tevye.

"I know," Tara replied. "Do you have time for extra practice?"

"Maybe tomorrow morning before *D&D*, because on weeknights, I need time to do my other homework after play practice. Chelsea is hanging out with her friends tomorrow until 6:00pm, as she usually does."

"How early could I come over?"

"If you show up at 8:00am, we'll have two hours to practice before *D&D*. I can set up for the gaming session before you show up. But make sure you read through your lines tonight a bunch of times, please."

"Something you want to share, Mr. Clarke?" Mr. Fruits said.

"Tara and I are arranging practice time for tomorrow."

"That's good, but pay attention, please."

He ran through the schedule for the next four weeks, including set building, undress and dress rehearsals, performances, and striking the set.

"Tickets go on sale on Monday," he said. "Today is the last day to let me know how many seats you want to reserve for each performance. As of Monday, you'll need to buy them directly on a first-come, first-served basis."

I had already turned in my request for my extended family, who would all come to the Saturday evening performance. Because the musical was likely to be well-attended, we had a Sunday matinée performance, followed by striking the set, and then a cast party at Nick's house.

"I'll see you at 8:00am tomorrow," Tara said.

"Cool."

As it was our last class of the day, when the dismissal bell rang, I headed to my locker, then went out to the parking lot to take the bus home, as none of my three usual rides were available. As soon as I got on the bus, I called Chelsea on her mobile phone.

"What's up?" she asked. "I just left Loyola."

"I wanted to let you know that Tara is coming over tomorrow morning to rehearse before *D&D*."

"Well, it's not like there are love scenes, and Golde is pretty much a bitch."

"She's called 'sharp-tongued' in the notes," I countered.

"They have to be politically correct!" Chelsea declared.

"There is a bed scene," I replied.

"And Tevye pretends to be waking from a nightmare! Anyway, you know I don't have a problem with Tara."

"I know, but I wanted to make sure you knew. That way, there are zero misunderstandings."

"I appreciate it! Larisa called today and wondered about visiting at Spring Break."

"Coming here or us going there?"

"Us going there. It's totally up to you. "Larisa, Pavel, Abi, and Rachel are absolutely coming to visit during the Summer."

"I don't have anything planned for Spring Break except spending time with you!"

"Cool. I'll call Larisa back and let her know. We can figure out our plans later. Are you on the bus?"

"Yes. I'll see you in about ninety minutes! Love you!"

"Love you!"

After we said 'goodbye', I closed my phone and slipped it back into my pocket.

 Jesse

"This is my cousin, Bonita," Luna said.

Bonita was almost as tall as Luna, with long black hair and brown eyes, and was built like a fútbol player - athletic, with long legs and small breasts.

"Hi, Bonita!" I said. "Welcome!"

"Thanks for allowing me to be here," she said in a fairly heavy Mexican accent. "I'm sorry you got hurt!"

"Thanks. It's not too bad, and in a week, I should be able to walk without crutches. Enjoy the party!"

Everyone arrived by 7:30pm, and while I couldn't dance, I could hang out with my friends. After discussing things with Simone and Luna and confirming with Dad, we stuck to the PG version of the party. That meant *Twister* was OK, but everyone would be clothed. We'd also skip any of the sex games, but instead play *Pictionary* with teams.

 Steve

"I don't know that we've ever had a Valentine's Day reservation for six, where five were women and none of them lesbian!" Sam Saunders declared when I arrived at Bucktown Bistro with my wives and girlfriends.

"Steve is different!" Kara declared.

"Now, there's an understatement if there ever was one!" Sam exclaimed. "We have you in the small private dining room. That frees up three tables in the main dining room. The large private room is open plan tonight."

"That makes perfect sense," I observed.

Sam led us to the private dining room, where a round table for six was set. My wives had worked out a seating arrangement that had me between Kara and Jessica, with Suzane next to Kara, Yuriko next to Suzanne, and Natalie between Suzanne and Jessica.

"So," Sam smirked as we sat down. "How do you celebrate later?"

"Join us and find out!" Kara teased.

"Somehow, I don't think Alex will go for that!"

"Go for what?" her husband asked, coming into the room.

"It's just Kara being Kara," Jessica declared. "She was inviting your wife to join us later."

"Well, if Sam wants me to work out a trade with Steve..."

"Not a chance, Alex Saunders!" Sam declared.

"Welcome, all of you," Alex said, as we recovered from the laughing. "Our Valentine's Day tasting menu has 'Steve Safe' choices for each course. Unless anyone objects, that's what we'll serve you."

"It's always a gastronomic adventure," I replied, looking around the table for any headshakes. "No objections. We're in your capable hands."

"Excellent. I chose the wine, keeping in mind Steve's usual price limit, and San Pellegrino is on the house."

"Thanks, Alex," I said.

He and Sam left, and Henry, our waiter, came in to begin serving us the multi-course meal.

 Birgit

"How late can you stay?" I asked Tomás.

"My dad is picking me up at midnight," he replied. "You know the stupid curfew rules, and that's the latest he's willing to stay up."

"Want to dance horizontally in my room for an hour?" I asked.

"Obviously!"

I took his hand and led him from the attic room, down the stairs, and to my room. I closed and locked the door, and we quickly undressed and got into bed. Thirty-five minutes later, we were resting after a very energetic fuck.

"What do I call you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't think you'd like it if I called you my girlfriend."

"I actually don't mind 'a girlfriend'," I replied. "I've called you 'a boyfriend'. I mean, it's not like we can say that we're lovers because too many people would get their panties in a twist because we're both fourteen."

"This is not a trap or anything," Tomás said, "but when would you consider having an actual boyfriend?"

"I've actually considered it, but I want the freedom to see other people. You know I absolutely won't object if you want to go out with someone else."

"Not to be a dog, but I don't know any other Freshman girls who'll do this with me!"

I laughed, "I think I know a few, but I shouldn't say."

There was a knock at the door, which surprised me, so I grabbed my robe, put it on and opened it.

"You wouldn't have room in your bed for one more, would you?" Libby asked.

"Tomás, do you mind if Libby joins us?"

"Do I look like an idiot?" he asked with a huge grin.

I opened the door all the way and allowed Libby to come into the room. She had come to the party alone because Lilibeth was busy with her parents. Libby quickly took off her clothes, then we got into bed with Tomás.

XXXI. A Rough Draft, So It Needs Work

February 15, 2003, Oak Park, Illinois

 Jesse

On Saturday morning, Mom One drove me to Oak Park to visit with Nicole. Mom sat with Mrs. Heath in the kitchen while I sat with Nicole in their front room, where they had made a temporary bedroom for her so she didn't have to go up and down the stairs.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"No pain!" Nicole exclaimed. "Very, very good drugs!"

"What did they prescribe?"

"Tramadol."

"Opioid?"

"Yes. I can only take it for ten days, then I switch to Tylenol 3, if I need something stronger than regular over-the-counter Advil or Tylenol."

"Aunt Jess said the surgery was textbook."

"That's what they said, and my surgeon expects a full recovery. Rehab is going to SUCK!"

"And you'll do it because you're Nicole Heath, and you love hockey more than anything in the world. It's just too bad you're a Penguins fan!"

"I wore the jersey just for you!" she declared.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"How's your knee?"

"Sore, but just the RICE protocol. I have to see the doctor on Friday for another evaluation before I can be cleared for walking or driving. I won't know for about eight weeks when I can go back on the ice."

"But you'll be able to play in the Fall, right?"

"Yes, but hockey camp is up in the air."

"So what's the scoop with the new team?"

"I expect about half our guys to make the new team. I have a spot, of course, as does Nicholas. Tomás is going to Chicago Latin, and Mitch is going to Lane Tech. I suspect a couple of other guys will move to private schools. Six of the current guys are graduating, so everyone else has a good shot."

"It kinda sucks that the championship is disbanding."

"I know, and it sucks that I have to change schools, but the gang problem is out of control. That's why my aunts moved my siblings to the Lab School. Albert is probably going to be at William Howard Taft on the Northside because they have NJROTC. A couple of the Navy men from Great Lakes, as well as Commander Aimee, greased the skids to make sure he could get in."

"That's cool."

"What about school?"

"Once I'm off the opioids because I can't take those at school, and they only last about six hours. I'll be on crutches, obviously. For the next ten days, Mikey will bring my assignments, and I'll have a tutor a couple of days a week. You're back in school, right?"

"Yes. Dad drives me, and I have help from Mitch, Tomás, Luna, and Missy to carry books, my lunch tray, and stuff like that."

"I take it *that* is off limits?" Nicole asked with a smirk.

"No exertion," I chuckled. "But I bet I'm not restricted anywhere near as long as Mikey, and he wasn't even injured!"

Nicole laughed, "I didn't discuss that with my doctor, but he said the same thing. Well, except for rehab."

"Yeah, same for me. I'll start seeing someone once I have my exam on Friday. When's your next post-op check?"

"Wednesday."

"I didn't ask, but I take it Natalie came to see you in the hospital?"

"Yes. She skipped class to sit with my parents and Mikey during the surgery, and then I saw her yesterday."

"Did your parents freak out at all?"

"No. Did yours?"

"No. I think hockey moms are built in such a way that they only lose it over bad calls and cheap shots, not injuries!"

Nicole laughed, "You might be on to something!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Thanks for driving me to Sensei Sharon's dōjō," I said to Natalie as we left the house.

"You're welcome. Have you had any success with Kevin?"

"No," I replied. "Well, I mean, we're friends, but he thinks I'm too young. I'm hoping maybe after I turn fifteen. How is your sister?"

"Feeling no pain! The surgery was successful."

"Good drugs?"

"Very! How is photography club going?"

"Good. I really enjoy it. You're going to Russia for the Summer, right?"

"Yes. I leave a week after final exams and come back a week before school starts. You have your big adventure with Jesse while I'm gone."

"Mostly, I won't be with him," I replied. "I'll be with Yuriko most of the time."

"Are you going to train at the dōjō?"

"It's 'no girls allowed'," I replied. "That's normal for Japan."

"No strident protests?" Natalie asked.

"I agree with Dad that Japan gets to run their country the way they want, and «Shihan» Hideki gets to run his school the way he wants. I mean, both «Shihan» Hiro and «Shihan» Hideki have no problem with female black belts or female Sensei, and Sensei Molly runs her dōjō."

"I expected the outrage meter to peg!" Natalie teased. "Are you mellowing?"

"NEVER!" I declared forcefully.

Natalie laughed, "There's the Birgit I know!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"You need to study more," I said to Tara after we'd run through our scenes twice.

"I don't know what the problem is," Tara replied. "I've never had a problem memorizing my lines in the past."

"You've had smaller parts," I observed. "This is your biggest part yet."

"I never really had a chance because Maggie used to get these parts opposite you."

"And now you do, which means extra effort. It's one thing to learn a dozen lines spread across a few scenes. It's another to learn scores or even hundreds of lines, and in this case, five musical numbers."

"How do you do it?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. I have a really good memory, and it just comes naturally."

"And you're creative, smart, and decent-looking! Chelsea is a lucky girl."

"Decent?" I asked with an arched eyebrow and a wry smile.

Tara laughed, "You aren't Johnny Depp, Ben Affleck, Richard Gere, or Brad Pitt. So, decent-looking!"

"We have time to run through our lines once more before the gang arrives for *D&D*."

We did that, finishing just before Ryan, Arby, Matt W, and Nick arrived. We all gathered around the dining room table and began our gaming session.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

When we left Nicole's house, I remembered that Anna Lundqvist would arrive in Chicago on Friday, and I hadn't called her to let her know about my injury. I doubted she'd change her plans, and in theory, I'd be able to walk with a brace, assuming everything went well with my exam.

"I need to call Anna," I said to Mom. "I didn't tell her about my injury."

Mom One laughed, "So her 'booty call' might not go as planned?"

I laughed, "The early 90s called, and they want their slang back!"

"You use 'hook up', but that's from the 60s 'free love' era!" Mom countered.

"So sue me!" I chuckled.

I pulled out my phone and used the phone book to dial Anna's number in Sweden. It would be late Saturday afternoon, so I wasn't sure if she'd be home, but I could leave her a message.

"«8321 047, hos Lundqvist»" ("[Lundqvist residence](#)")

It was a male voice, so it wasn't Anna.

"Hello. This is Jesse Block calling from Chicago. May I speak with Anna?"

"One moment."

I heard him call Anna, who came to the phone.

"Jesse? Is there a problem?"

"I wanted to let you know I injured my knee last Saturday during our regional semifinal game. It's not bad, but I might be on crutches when you're here, though hopefully I can walk with a brace."

"Oh! What happened?"

"A couple of skaters crashed into me. I twisted my knee and had a mild concussion. One of the other skaters had to have surgery to repair her ACL."

"Are you saying I shouldn't come?"

"No. I just wanted to let you know I might not be very mobile, and I don't know if I'll be able to drive."

"It's OK. I'm coming to see you! I mean, if you still want me to."

"I do! I have a check-up on Friday, but it'll be done by the time we need to drive to O'Hare to get you. I'm not sure who'll drive me, but someone will."

"OK! See you Friday! I hope you feel better!"

"Thanks. See you Friday."

We said 'goodbye', and I closed my phone.

"All set," I said.

"I'll drive you to O'Hare," Mom One said. "I'm taking the afternoon off to take you to see Doctor McCoy, given you can't drive or walk there. I'll pick you up from school at 1:00pm."

"OK. I'll need a note, and you'll have to come into the office and show ID. All the doors except for the one that leads right to the office are locked now."

"When did that happen?" Mom Two asked.

"After Christmas break, the same time they added the second 'School Resource Officer', for all the good that's done."

"I know you made a pragmatic decision, but how do you really feel about changing schools?"

"I don't like it. I actually like my teachers, and Kenwood is academically solid. But things have gone seriously downhill the last two years with drugs and gangs. They really needed to do something to address it five years ago, but with the War on Drugs, it was inevitable. If the gangs had left the hockey players alone, I'd have stayed. But once guys like DeShawn, Tomás, Freddy, Tom, and Steve talked about changing schools, the hockey program was toast, and Morgan Park administered the coup de grâce. That more or less forced my hand."

"How is Nicole doing?"

"High as a kite!" I chuckled. "The pain meds are really strong."

"You have to be really careful with those," Mom One said. "It's really easy to become addicted."

"I don't think Nicole is likely to become addicted," I said. "But they also limited her prescription for tramadol to ten days, then they'll switch her to Tylenol 3."

"Level with me -- are you in pain?"

"Sure, but Advil takes the edge off, and I'm like Dad -- I'd rather be uncomfortable than prop up the pharmaceutical industry while introducing unnatural compounds into my body! I'd use Anacin like Dad, but I know the dangers for anyone under eighteen."

"You are your father's son, that's for sure!"

"Hey, YOU chose him, not me!" I chuckled. "I'm just along for the ride!"

"What are your plans for the rest of the day?"

"Luna, Simone, and and Luna's cousin Bonita are bringing lunch and will hang out for the afternoon. Nicholas, Pete, Mitch, and DeShawn are bringing pizza for dinner. You and Mom Two are going out, right?"

"Yes. We'll leave around 1:00pm and be back around midnight."

 Birgit

"Hi, Kevin!" I exclaimed when I saw Kevin at the dōjō

"Hi, Birgit!" Kevin replied. "Make sure you see Sensei Sharon before class."

"I'll go right now," I replied.

I walked to the door to Sensei Sharon's office and she waved me in.

"Good morning, Sensei," I said, bowing.

"Good morning, Birgit! Kevin said you would be here this morning. Welcome."

"Thank you, Sensei!"

"How is your dad?"

"Good. He's really busy and is traveling a lot."

"OK. Go take your place. Class starts in about five minutes."

"Yes, Sensei!"

I moved to the main training room and stood next to Kevin, who had slightly longer time in rank than I did.

"If you can drive me home, we could have lunch," I suggested. "I can tell Natalie I don't need a ride. "Just burgers at the diner around the corner."

"Sure," he agreed.

"Be right back."

I walked to the viewing area and let Natalie know Kevin was going to bring me home.

"If anything changes or you need a ride, just call me, and I'll come get you."

"Thanks," I replied.

She left, and I went back to my spot next to Kevin. I hoped he'd mellow about the age difference, but I suspected it might not be before I turned fifteen, if even then. I set that aside because Sensei Sharon came into the training room and clapped her hands twice to begin the session.

 Steve

"Hi, Madalyn," I said when I walked into the dōjō.

"I thought I'd come watch again. I'm actually thinking of taking lessons."

"You're welcome to participate today, if you like. Your first uniform is free, even if you choose not to continue."

"I'll just watch, if that's OK."

"Always. You're also welcome to come this afternoon."

"Thanks."

Will wasn't at the dōjō, which meant I led the morning class. I asked Miyu to lead our meditation time and exercises, then I worked with the white belts. I liked to do that from time to time, though I strongly preferred working with brown belts. When we finished, Avanti walked back to the house with Kara, Suzanne, Stephe, Ashley, and me to have lunch.

"What did Madalyn want?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"She's thinking of starting lessons," I replied. "The only concern I have is that she'll be at Northwestern in the Fall, and that would make it difficult for her to attend. She might be better off at Sharon's dōjō, which is further north. I won't discourage her, obviously, but I will point out the practical concerns about coming to weekday classes."

"Does she have a car?" Avanti asked. "Maybe that's why."

"Maybe," I allowed. "But it's still forty minutes each way, four times a week if she's going to be serious about it. I'll discuss it with her, if she decides she wants to participate."

We arrived at the house, and Avanti and I prepared a lunch of soup, sandwiches, and fruit for everyone, including Natalie and Yuriko. Albert wasn't home because he was at his service project, and Jesse was entertaining friends in the

coach house. When we finished eating, Avanti and I went to the sauna to have a mentoring session.

 Jesse

"How are you doing?" Luna asked as we sat down to eat tacos and burritos that she and Bonita had made.

"OK. I saw Nicole this morning, and she's in far worse shape."

"When will you be able to do anything besides rest?" Simone asked.

"Hopefully, Friday," I replied. "But that depends on what the doctor says. Remember, my friend from Sweden will be here on Friday, and she'll be here for the week."

"She's skipping school?" Bonita asked.

"No," I replied, "they have a week off in February every year for skiing or other winter sports."

"Are you allowed to use the sauna?" Luna asked.

"Yes, though we'd have to wait until around 2:00pm because my dad is likely in there with one of his students."

"That wouldn't bother me," Luna said.

"No, but Dad is mentoring, so the conversations are private. We can go after he heads to his afternoon class. Does Bonita know how we use the sauna?"

"Yes, and I think we probably need to use towels."

"OK," I replied. "These tacos and burritos are awesome, by the way!"

"Thanks!" Luna replied.

"Thanks!" Bonita exclaimed.

"What are we doing with the guys later?" Simone asked.

"I figured we'd watch movies," I replied. "We have plenty of DVDs, and we also have HBO and Showtime."

"Who's going to be here?" Simone asked.

"Nicholas, Pete, Mitch, and DeShawn," I replied. "They're bringing pizza at 6:00pm."

"Cool!"

 Birgit

"I'm still surprised your parents give you so much freedom," Kevin observed after we ordered.

"Why?" I asked. "I'm mature, intelligent, and a black belt in Shōtōkan. And I'm gorgeous, to boot!"

Kevin laughed, which was what I had hoped would happen.

"And *extremely* modest! Not!"

"But what I said was accurate, too! If you aren't confident in yourself, why would anyone be confident in you?"

"A good point, but isn't social convention to not sing your own praises?"

"Social convention is often dumb, and it's getting dumber! May I make an observation?"

"Could I stop you?" Kevin asked with a sly smile.

"Probably not! Anyway, social conventions change, as I said. When my parents were in High School, nobody thought twice about a Senior and a Freshman dating. Dad graduated in '81 and Mom in '82, and the same thing was true in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Now, suddenly, 'progress' means people freak out about it. How is that even progress?"

"Why do I have the feeling that I'm not going to win a debate with you?" Kevin asked.

"Because you won't! Teenagers are not 'children' the way people are starting to use that word. There is a serious difference between someone who is almost fifteen and someone who is twelve or ten or six. Society says that the day before you turned eighteen, you were a 'child'. Do *you* believe you were a 'child' the way they meant that?"

"I'm compelled to say 'no'," Kevin said with a smile. "Any other answer seems wrong."

"Exactly."

"Let's say, for the sake of argument, I yield on that point. It doesn't change the fact that, according to my dad, even kissing you could result in criminal charges because I'm eighteen and you aren't at least seventeen."

"There's a simple solution to that -- no public displays of affection. I guarantee my parents won't object to us going out, so who would complain? And even if they did, if I say we haven't even kissed, what can they possibly do? And we can double date or spend time at my house when my parents are home."

"You're trying awfully hard," Kevin observed. "Why?"

"Don't you think you're worth it?" I asked slyly.

"Trapped again!" Kevin declared. "I can't answer anything but 'yes'."

"*This is the girl you're looking for,*" I smirked, making a hand gesture similar to Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*.

"Nice," Kevin chuckled. "Jedi mind tricks?"

"I know better tricks! And I'm not asking you to be a couple, just go out sometimes. You'll be at UofC in the Fall and going to my dad's dōjō, right?"

"That is the plan."

"So, let's do something once a month until then. You don't have a girlfriend, right?"

"Right."

"And I don't have a boyfriend. Let's alternate visits to our respective dōjō each month and have lunch. That's totally safe."

Kevin laughed, "Again, that sounds like what a guy would say to a girl."

"Right, but in this situation, I'm the one trying to convince you that it's safe, when usually it's the guy trying to convince the girl."

"Why do I also feel as if you're in complete control of everything in your life?"

"I wish!" I exclaimed. "But I do mostly run my own life the way I want to live it, and my parents support that. I suspect that entire concept makes you uncomfortable."

"It's not something I'm used to."

"I totally get it, but I think my parents got it right. How many teens do you know who think that?"

"None, besides you."

"Next month? It'll have to be March 8th because I'll be in Saint Martin with my friends for Spring Break."

"Saint Martin? In the Caribbean?"

"Yes. My dad's friend has a house down there, and I'm taking seven friends."

"No parents?"

"No, my mom and dad are going as chaperones, but they'll let us pretty much do what we want while we're there. March 8th?"

"March 8th."

 Steve

"Let me get you a dōgi -- a uniform -- so you can sit with us," I offered Madalyn when I arrived at the dōjō for my afternoon class.

"It's a trap!" Birgit warned with a smirk.

Madalyn laughed, "I put on the uniform, and I'm committed?"

"If you do, you should *be* committed!" Birgit declared.

"Enough, Pumpkin!" I said. "No commitment, Madalyn; but the rules for being in the training area require wearing a dōgi."

"I'll take the risk, despite Birgit's warning."

I went to the office and got a uniform and white belt for Madalyn, and asked Birgit to help Madalyn put it on. They went into the girls' locker room and came out about three minutes later. We began, as usual, with our extended meditation, then did our warm-up exercises.

"Everyone, this is Madalyn Fowler, reporter for *The Midway*, the Lab School newspaper. She wrote an article about us, and she was impressed enough to consider joining our dōjō. Today, I'd like each of you to take two minutes and say your name and why you're here. I'll start.

"I walked into the dōjō in August 1981, shortly after I moved to Chicago, looking for a way to exercise. It was, as my precocious daughter suggested earlier, a trap! Twenty-two years later, I'm still here, but it's not about the exercise; it's about being a whole person - body, mind, and spirit. The first stage of that journey took

fifteen years and culminated in Japan. That first stage would have been a lot shorter had I taken what Avanti's mom was teaching me to heart. Stage two of the journey is one that will take me to the next life, hopefully after a long, productive, prosperous life. Molly?"

"I was a shy, overweight, nerdy girl in middle school, and my dad sent me to a dōjō in Milwaukee. I fell in love with Shōtōkan and eventually was given permission to start my own dōjō. My former «Shihan» was 'Cobra Kai', not 'Miyagi-Dō', and it turns out that 'Miyagi-Dō' is the right way to go. Sensei Steve understands that, and that's why he's my «Shihan»."

"Miyu?" I prompted.

"I was a rebellious teen, had no respect for myself, and was completely out of control. The only way to break that cycle was to become Sensei Steve's student. He molded me into the responsible adult I've become."

"Dyani?"

"Miyu's older sister, who was one of Steve's students, brought me to the dōjō one day in 1995. I found exactly the mentor I needed, and I'm going to seriously miss my friends here when I return to "«Naabeehó Bináhásdzo», the Navajo Nation, which for me is northeastern Arizona, in June. I'll be living just outside the city of «Tségháhoodzání», which is 'Window Rock' in English, working on water purification and distribution."

"Rachel?"

"I basically spent twenty years self-cloistered because of a traumatic experience. A friend encouraged me to take a self-defense course because of the increase in crime in my neighborhood, especially muggings. Steve taught me self-defense,

but he also helped me come out of my shell, and to leave my cloister. I'm a complete person now."

"Suzanne?"

"Fate put me on the same plane as Steve on a flight to Colorado. We struck up a conversation, and that pivotal moment led me to ask Steve to be my mentor. From there, it led to a very unconventional marriage to Steve, Kara, and Jessica. Karate is part of the program, as it were, for the most important woman in Steve's life."

"Neil?"

"I needed mental, emotional, and spiritual discipline. Of course, I didn't know that when I walked into the dōjō two years ago, ostensibly to lose weight. Steve challenged me and has spent the last two years remaking me into the person I should be, rather than the one I was becoming."

"Natalie?"

"I met Steve on a trip to Russia when his son was playing in a series of exhibition games against Russian youth teams. Steve talked to me as an adult and encouraged me to *be* an adult. I fell in love with Russia, and with Steve's help, I met his Russian friends and I'll be attending graduate school in Russia. I'm here because Steve is my mentor, and this is part of the mentoring process."

"Sarah?"

"I was raised in a traditional and strict Catholic household. I came to Chicago for school, and to have my horizons broadened. I met Steve indirectly through my older sister, and as with the others, found someone who could mentor me and guide me into becoming the person I was meant to be."

"Avanti?"

"My mom is the person Steve mentioned who he should have truly listened to, and whose advice he should have taken to heart. In my tradition, we select gurus, or what others are calling mentors, and my mom suggested Steve would be the perfect mentor, because, as she put it, he finally got his head out of his nether regions!"

Everyone laughed.

"And Birgit," I said.

"My dad and I have been very close since I was little, and I decided I wanted to start karate when I was a toddler. I'm serious about it, and this group is for people who are serious about it. That means body, mind, and spirit, just as Dad said. I can't think of a better guide to becoming who I'm meant to be."

"Thank you, all," I said. "Let's review the «Shōtōkan nijū kun» and the «Dōjō kun» for Madalyn."



Jesse

"It's 2:00pm, so we could go over," Luna suggested.

"I didn't consider the stairs," I replied. "I'm not sure it's wise to try to navigate the stairs before I see the doctor on Friday."

"And the elevator doesn't go to the basement, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. Why don't we go next door and hang out until the guys show up? We could use the attic room and put on music. There are floor pillows in the closet next to the elevator."

"I think that's probably best," Simone agreed. "The last thing you want to do is mess up your knee so you can't go to hockey camp."

"What's that?" Bonita asked.

"A two-week training camp in Rochester, Minnesota. We spend about six hours a day on the ice working with coaches and trainers, and there is classroom work as well. This year, I'm attending for two weeks and I'm also coaching younger kids for two weeks. Well, assuming my knee can handle it."

"I heard you're going to Japan this summer."

"My sister and I are going."

"No parents?!" Bonita asked, surprised.

"No parents. I've traveled without my parents, and so has my sister. It's no big deal."

"Where have you traveled?"

"Canada, Russia, and Sweden, plus places in the US."

"That's cool. The only places I've been are the US and Mexico."

"Same," Luna said.

"I went to France," Simone said. "Shall we go next door?"

"Yes," I said.

We made our way carefully to the main house, then used the elevator to go up to the attic room. Luna and Simone got floor pillows and spread them so we could all relax on them and listen to music.

 Michael

"Got you again!" Andi exclaimed.

"Yeah, yeah!" I replied.

"Do you play *Dungeons & Dragons*?"

"No. I mean, I have, but I prefer computer games, including *D&D*-type games. I have *Neverwinter Nights* plus the previous games in the *Baldur's Gate* series. I also have *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. *Neverwinter Nights* has a multiplayer version, and I can host a game, so we could play together. It even has a DM mode. Want to play?"

"Sure!" Andi agreed. "One more thing I can kick your butt at!"

The game was already installed on both PCs, so it was just a matter of starting it and setting it in multiplayer mode.

"Before I forget, Dad is going to get Sox tickets. Are you going anywhere this Summer?"

"Mom and Eduardo haven't mentioned anything specific, so probably not. Obviously, robotics will start again at the beginning of August, so you need to

take that into account."

"Do you know how that will work with the new school?" Andi asked.

"No, but they promised they'd replicate all the programs."

"Anyway, Dad will get four tickets for each game. If Eduardo can't join us, then we can invite someone else."

"Cool. Ready to play?"

"Yes!"



Steve

"What did you think?" I asked Madalyn after she had changed back into her street clothes.

"Can we speak privately?"

"Sure. Birgit, would you walk Avanti back to the house to meet her mom?"

"Yes, Sensei Dad!" Birgit smirked.

She, Avanti, and Suzanne left, and I locked the door, as the dōjō was officially closed after 1:00pm on Saturdays.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You slept with every single girl in this group at one time or another. Well, except for Birgit, obviously."

"You know I can't admit or deny that, Miss Fowler!"

"You could deny it, so refusing to admit or deny is an admission."

"No, it's not," I replied. "It's a neutral statement that you cannot legitimately infer anything from. This is a lesson to remember throughout your career -- 'no comment' is exactly that. All you can do is report what you *know* and can *prove*, and the fact that the person you asked refused to comment."

"Then how could you ever do investigative journalism?"

"That's different from factual reporting," I replied. "It's one thing to write a news article; it's a very different thing to write an investigative report. You're a news reporter, right? Or at least that's how you presented yourself."

"I'm not sure that's a reasonable distinction."

"And I'm not sure passing opinion and speculation is *reporting*. It's *journalism*, but you need to distinguish between what you know and what you speculate. One level of distinction is news pages versus editorial and op-ed pages. I'll put you in touch with Stan Jakes and Jasmine Prager. They'll do a much better job of explaining than I can, given it's not what I do for a living."

"You realize that if I were to report that I asked you the question and you refused to answer, people would draw the same conclusion I did."

"Yes, that's true. And that's on them. You report the facts and let your readers decide."

"I think I see what you're getting at."

"Good. Did you write your piece for the website?"

"A rough draft, so it needs work."

"Further research?" I asked with a smile

"If it's allowed and you're offering, I have about two and a half hours..."

"Then let's go to the house," I said.

We left the dōjō and began walking towards the compound.

"Anything specific you want to research or refresh?" I asked.

"Lotus, sixty-nine, missionary, then shower where we use the Lotus position, but you cum in my mouth."

"No objections!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"How was your game?" Chelsea asked.

"Great! How was your day?"

"Wendy, Lisa, and I went to Fox Valley Mall and window shopped, then ate at the food court. After lunch, we saw *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, given you said you had no interest in seeing it."

"My rom-com limit is about one per year!" I said with a smile. "How was it?"

"Pretty funny, actually. How did things go with Tara?"

"OK. The challenge is that this is her first major role, and she isn't used to having to learn so many lines. I'll probably work with her a couple of nights this week, if it's OK."

"I'll be in the city, so you aren't taking any time from me. And even so, I know how important drama is to you."

"Thanks. We should get going so we can meet the gang at Gario's for pizza."

"Are we still seeing *Jungle Book 2*?"

"That is the plan."

"Cool."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

We'd done what Madalyn suggested, ending in the shower in a Lotus position under the spray, with Madalyn lifting off and finishing me with her mouth. As she had when we'd engaged in sixty-nine in the bed, she hadn't swallowed, and she shared a sloppy French kiss. After the kiss, we began washing each other, one of my favorite rituals.

"Is your research sufficient to complete your online story?"

"Well," Madalyn smirked, "it's about first times, so this was research for the future!"

"Speaking of the future, if you live in the dorms at Northwestern, it's going to be challenging to come to the dōjō during the week, even if you have a car."

"Classes are every weekday, right?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking that if I did it, I'd come on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays when classes are in session because I only have class in the mornings those days. Is three times a week sufficient?"

"For karate?" I asked with a smirk. "Yes."

Madalyn laughed, "Given I've learned you have three wives and two steady girlfriends, and have the freedom to manage your sex life as you see fit, I'm going to guess three times a *day* is barely sufficient."

I chuckled, "Believe it or not, there is a lot of cuddling."

"I actually believe it. One thing I hear from my few friends who have had sex is basically, when it's done, that's it. I mean, sure, part of it is limited opportunity and wanting to limit the risk of being caught, but guys don't seem to want to cuddle."

"That's always been important to me, as is the shower ritual afterwards. It started as a way to ensure no evidence was left for parents, but it actually backfired on Kara and me when her mom noticed her hair was wet."

"Oops!" Madalyn said with a soft laugh.

"Fortunately, her mom was cool about it."

"So now?"

"It's very intimate."

"More intimate than sex?"

"Not more, just different. To me, and I think you've discovered this, sex is not intimacy, though it is a sign of intimacy. True intimacy is a meeting of the souls, or as the Greeks called it, the «nous» - the 'authentic self'."

"So, it was just sex, then?" Madalyn asked.

"Was it?" I asked as we got out of the shower.

"I *thought* so, but it turns out it was the start of a mentoring relationship."

"Something that is fairly common for me. One of two things is usually true -- sex is the consummation of an intimate relationship, bonding, if you will, or sex is an icebreaker for a mentoring relationship. It's rare that it's *purely* sex, but that has happened."

"You surprised me by offering to be together again. Was that because of something you detected?"

"When you suggested you might be interested in joining the dōjō, I considered what you might be looking for. After my afternoon class, I was reasonably sure you were looking for a mentor. As for sex, I enjoyed being with you and suggested another encounter in a way that you could easily rebuff."

"And in the future?"

"That's entirely up to you, though I suspect you want mentoring and access to my contacts more than you want sex. Not that you didn't enjoy the sex immensely, but that's not what you need from me long-term."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not in the least. There are a number of young women I mentor who have steady boyfriends or are married, and that puts them completely off limits."

"Do you mentor guys?"

"A few, but it's mostly young women."

We finished dressing, and I walked Madalyn to the front door.

"I'll start coming to classes on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays and come to your Saturday afternoon class. I won't be able to come to Philosophy Club until I start at Northwestern."

"That works well, I think. I'll have Birgit invite you for our cookout on the Fourth of July, and I'll invite Stan Jakes and Jasmine Prager. I'll make the introductions, then it's up to you."

"Thanks!"

She left the house after giving me a quick kiss, and I went to the Indian room where Kara and Suzanne were waiting.

"I'm not surprised she asked for a second time," Kara said.

"Actually, she wasn't planning to, but I offered, and she accepted."

"Of course she did!" Kara declared.

"She's is going to start at the dōjō," I said. "I'm going to ask Birgit to invite Madalyn to our Fourth of July cookout, and I'll invite Stan and Jasmine. Madalyn can't reasonably start coming to Philosophy Club until school starts."

"She's eighteen, right?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes, but her parents have fallen into the 'High School students are children, no different from pre-teens' trap into which most of society has fallen."

"Shall we prepare dinner?" Kara suggested.

"It'll only be the three of us, Jess, and Yuriko."

"Sauna after dinner?"

"Absolutely!"